

THE EXECUTION ROOM
Why blue is the colour of death in Texas, p16

SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP
Will history put Blair above Clinton? P19

BRITS AND BRAS
Why are we so obsessed with them? P16

OFFICE POLITICS
How to get back at your boss - plus hundreds of jobs

THE INDEPENDENT

Wednesday 4 February 1998 45p No 3,525

Murdoch faces global tax inquiry, but Blair backs him

Exclusive: Move against tycoon as ministers prepare to defend his British interests in the Lords

A SECRET international task force of investigators has been set up to examine why Rupert Murdoch's News Corp pays virtually no tax. The unprecedented move against the Murdoch empire comes as ministers prepare to go into battle to defend the media baron's British interests.

An agreement to launch the inquiry, involving tax investigators from Britain, America, Canada and Australia was reached at a secret meeting in Sydney in December. The authorities are concerned that Mr Murdoch's companies pay a fraction of the taxes paid by his competitors in the cut-throat media business.

At the same time, however, *The Independent* has learned that Tony Blair has ordered total retreat from any government confrontation with Mr Murdoch over his aggressive pursuit of a price war in the newspaper industry.

Reneging on pre-election pledges, Labour peers have been ordered to oppose an all-party attempt to curb Mr Murdoch's power in a crucial House of Lords vote next Monday.

The amendment, tabled with all-par-

By Steve Boggan and Anthony Bevins

lands, the Dutch Antilles and Bermuda. By the time the money had finished its journey, a loss was recorded in Australia, greatly reducing its overall tax bill.

In the United Kingdom, News International, the UK arm of News Corp, which owns the *Times*, the *Sun*, the *Sunday Times* and the *News of the World*, recorded profits of almost £1bn between 1985 and 1995. An *Independent* investigation revealed that the group paid just £11.74m tax - a rate of just 1.2 per cent. At the time, corporation tax was levied at 33 per cent.

The avoidance methods used by Mr Murdoch's accountants are legal, but there is a political and moral groundswell of opinion which believes News Corp's tax burden should reflect its profits.

"No one is happy with the way Mr Murdoch is behaving," said a source close to the investigation. "The [investigators] are querying whether he legitimately makes a loss or not. A plan has been put into place to tackle his empire."

However, unless taxation systems can be unified internationally, it is not clear what the authorities can do. News Corp's avoidance methodology involves inter-company loans, the use of subsidiaries in off-shore tax havens and the tax-relief granted on interest on loan re-payments - some of which the task force will want to examine. All such methods, however, are quite legal.

"The problem the tax authorities have with Murdoch is that he has all the facts about everything in his empire but if you are an investigator in the UK, you can only find out about the UK business; if you are an investigator in the US, then you can only look at the US end," said the source.

"The purpose of this meeting was to break across that boundary and share information to try and match [the investigators'] knowledge with his."

All Labour peers have been ordered to vote against it on Monday, and Lord Simon of Highbury, Minister Trade and Competitiveness, has said that the Government will not depart from a European "model" on tackling abuse of market power. But Cabinet sources have told the *Independent* that the order had "come down" from No 10 that nothing was to be done to disturb or interfere with the newspaper proprietors. Margaret Beckett, President of the Board of Trade, has been told to maintain a "hands-off" approach.

If the official Opposition backs the Government, or abstains, it is unlikely that the Murdoch amendment can be carried in the Lords - or upheld in the Commons.

In 1989, an Australian parliamentary investigation found that News Corp had routed all its profits through subsidiaries in low-tax countries like the Cayman Islands.

Last year, while other international media groups, such as Walt Disney Corporation, paid up to 28 per cent of their income in tax, News Corp reported paying \$103m (£62.42m) on operating profits of \$1.32bn (£800m) world-wide, a rate of just 7.8 per cent.

In 1989, an Australian parliamentary investigation found that News Corp had routed all its profits through subsidiaries in low-tax countries like the Cayman Islands.

THE EXECUTION set for last night of Karla Faye Tucker was to be just like any other at Huntsville Penitentiary: there would be no fuss just because she was a woman. That is, according to Governor George Bush and to officials of the prison yesterday.

True and not true. There was no change to the grim - and, to the prison officers, familiar - timetable governing the last minutes of the convict's life. But for the first time on an execution night, the city's main Episcopal church was to hold a special service at the hour of Tucker's dispatch. And a local bar, two blocks from the prison, had plans for a post-Karla karaoke party last night.

From David Usborne
in Huntsville, Texas

Two telephone lines were kept open to the prison all day yesterday. One was from the US Supreme Court, which last night refused to block Tucker's execution. The second fed directly to the office of Governor Bush in Austin, the state capital.

State officials said that Governor Bush had been awaiting final word from the court before deciding whether to exercise his only option to order a one-time 30-day stay. At the weekend, he received a videotaped message from Tucker pleading with him for a reprieve. He has also been inundated by some 2,400 letters asking for clemency.

Few of the letters, however, had come from Texans and political pressure to act was marginal. Tucker's case, the Governor had already stated, should be treated like any other.



Tucker: Pleaded for her life

fore the appointed hour of 6pm, she was to be walked to the death chamber itself and asked to lie down on the trolley so that intravenous drips could be connected to her arms.

Only once in the 55 executions he has witnessed has there been any trouble in persuading convicts to lie down, said Larry Fitzgerald a prison spokesman. "Everyone else has actually hopped on to the gurney."

The killing of Tucker was to take roughly two minutes, with three substances being injected in quick succession - an anaesthetic to put her to sleep, a muscle relaxant to collapse her lungs and finally a lethal cocktail to stop the heart.

Unlike the firing squad or electric chair, death by injection offers little by way of spectacle; nothing, in fact, except for a sudden, and usually quite noisy gushing of air from the condemned's mouth as the lungs fold in on themselves.

Free phone calls if you can bear the ads

By Chris Godsmark

THE days of the telephone bill could soon be numbered, with the launch of a service offering customers unlimited access to free phone calls. The only catch is that every few minutes callers have to break off to listen to an advertisement, an innovation which its backers believe could be the ultimate direct marketing weapon.

Energis, the fast-growing phone network, completed a trial of the service before Christmas and is considering going live in a few months time. "This is direct advertising with a vengeance. The customer gets instant gratification," said Alistair Henderson from the company.

The idea, which originated in Sweden a year ago, is deceptively simple. Customers call a free phone number, then key in the phone number they want to dial. The call begins with an advert for anything from local businesses to high street store chains. The longer

subscribers stay on the line, the more adverts they are subjected to, preceded by a warning tone.

Energis declined to reveal the companies taking part in the trial, but one possibility was a recorded message from a pizza parlour which would ask customers to press the keypad if they were feeling hungry. When they hung up, the pizza chain would automatically call them back to take the order.

Though customers have no idea which advert will come up, they are questioned before they join the scheme to find out their age and interests. You might get an advert for wine if you are a wine lover, and then an airline saying they've got cheap seats available.

Energis says the scheme is an alternative to direct mail sent through the post and frequently thrown straight into the bin.

Davis quits as new lottery doubts emerge

Exclusive

By Kim Sengupta

name them as a source for information".

Yesterday a spokesman at the FBI headquarters in Washington DC stated they have no record of any checks being carried out on behalf of the Office of National Lottery or Peter Davis, or any information being passed on to these parties. Nor could he find any record of Mr Davis being given permission to tell third parties of information.

A spokesman said: "I cannot find any record of a request of that from either Peter Davis, the Office of National Lottery or others acting on their behalf. Nor can I find any record of him being given permission to say we have been supplying him with information."

Mr Davis said he had hired two outside investigators, Control Risks and Hill Samuel, to carry out some checks, and it was Control Risks who were involved in the crucial question of ascertaining the fitness and propriety of would-be lottery operators. Control Risks said last night it had carried out work for Ofot on publicly available database. Sources in the company said it had not carried out a comprehensive check.

The Public Affairs Committee stated that Peter Davis made "serious errors of judgement" over his links with Glech before he awarded the contract.

Profile, page 2



Rupert Murdoch: News International, his UK company, pays just 1.2 per cent in tax

I.Q. of 145 and Can't Remember?

A FAMOUS international publisher reports that there is a simple technique for acquiring a powerful memory which can pay you real dividends in both business and social advancement. It works like magic to give you added poise, self-confidence and greater popularity.



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According to this publisher, many people do not realise how much they can influence others simply by remembering accurately everything they see, hear or read. Whether in business, at social functions, or even in casual conversation with new acquaintances, there are ways in which you can dominate each situation simply by your ability to remember.

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more poised and self-confident in everything you say and do. These are only a few of the ways in which you can benefit by possessing a trained memory.

To acquaint all readers of *The Independent* with the easy-to-follow rules for developing skill in remembering, we, the publishers, have printed full details of this interesting self-training method in a fascinating booklet, "Adventures in Memory", sent free on request. No obligation. No salesman will call. Just fill in and return the coupon on Page 12 (you don't even need to stamp your envelope), or write to: Memory and Concentration Studies, (Dept. IDM88), FREEPOST 198, Manchester M60 3DL.

Grim routine played out as woman steels herself for death chamber

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INSIDE GUIDE: WEATHER, EYE P10 • CROSSWORD, P28 AND EYE P9 • TODAY'S TELEVISION, EYE P12 • FULL CONTENTS, P2

Branson in call for creation of no-profit People's Lottery

Richard Branson last night called for the dissolution of the Camelot consortium and the establishment of a new National Lottery. He spoke to Andrew Buncome following his libel battle victory against Guy Snowden and the resignation of the lottery regulator Peter Davis.

More people would play the lottery if it was not run for profit, evidence brought in the libel case had demonstrated, Mr Branson said last night, and suggested it should be renamed the People's Lottery. "The Government had pledged to operate the lottery for no profit. I hope that any backtracking that may have gone on will come to an end. I think that naming it the People's Lottery would give it a fresh start."

He feels that in order to restore public faith there must be a fundamental overhaul of the lottery's operation. "Yesterday [Monday] both the regulator, Peter Davis, and Camelot misled

the public by saying this was an argument between two individuals. That was not the case. GTech were found as guilty as Mr Snowden. If Mr Snowden has to resign then GTech has to step down as well," he said.

"It may be easier, and there is enough ground for doing so, to take the shareholders away altogether, get rid of Camelot and for a period of time let the staff continue to operate it.

"I think to restore public faith GTech has to go and it may be as well to get rid of all the shareholders and dissolve the Camelot consortium."

Snacking on toast and Marmite in the drawing room of his offices in west London, Mr Branson repeated that he no longer wanted to run the lottery.

"I still believe that what I do is set up companies, get good people in and get things running. I would be delighted to help, but personally I don't feel they need me. There are plenty of very good people around the world and whether I am involved or not is really an irrelevance."

He said he had been convinced that if the lottery was to continue to be a success the regulator, Peter Davis, had to

stand down. "Mr Davis put out a statement saying what I had said was untrue. I honestly didn't think he could stay on."

Mr Branson said that during the libel trial, which he had initiated against Mr Snowden after the American businessman denied trying to bribe him to drop his bid to run the National Lottery for no profit, he had suffered from a "bad press" campaign launched by his detractors.

"Was it a coincidence that on the first day of the trial all these private letters between myself and Elton John should suddenly appear?" he said. "There is no doubt that things were being fed to journalists."

Mr Branson, 47, who is to donate his £100,000 damages to charity, said he was used to the backlash his gestures sometimes brought. "There is no question the times I have been criticised in my life have been for doing things not to make money but to help the community. If I simply set up companies to make lots of money people would not mind." But he said when the criticism stood in the way of what he was trying to do, it was "very annoying".



Final showdown: Peter Davis arriving to meet Chris Smith yesterday. Photograph: Reuters

Crisis meeting as lottery regulator fights to keep job

Peter Davis the lottery regulator resigned last night after a four hour meeting with the Culture Secretary, Chris Smith. Kim Sengupta looks at the trials and tribulations of Britain's first lottery regulator.

run the lottery, but now he has been deemed unable to regulate it. More than 30 years ago Mr Davis was sixth in the country's accountancy exams, but since then he has been closely involved with two of Britain's biggest business failures, Hair Queenway and Lloyd's.

It was therefore something of a surprise when he was named as lottery regulator, and there was further surprise and anger about some of his actions while in the post. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee decided Mr Davis had made "serious errors of judgement" in his relationship with GTech, a US partner of the consortium Camelot to whom he awarded the contract.

While he was deciding on the award Mr Davis accepted five free flights from the company, against Whitehall advice, during a business trip to the States in 1994. He explained that he was saving taxpayers' money.

His £84,000-a-year contract had been due to expire in October, and even if he had not resigned yesterday it is thought highly unlikely that it would have been renewed. Either way, the career country's first lottery regulator has come to an inglorious end.

Mr Davis's firm and most important job was to decide who were fit and proper persons to

PAC member Alan Williams last night put down a Commons motion asking him to resign.

Murdoch's juggling outwits taxmen around the world

An international task-force of tax investigators from at least four countries is attempting to unravel Rupert Murdoch's labyrinthine business affairs in a bid to make him pay more tax. Steve Boggan shows how the Murdoch media empire has so far been able – quite legally – to outwit the taxman.

You don't get to be the planet's biggest media mogul by being generous with your tax returns, but Rupert Murdoch makes his fellow corporate giants appear positively charitable.

A recent comparison of media empires showed that while most of his competitors paid

taxes at anything up to 32.5 per cent, Mr Murdoch's News Corp paid just 7.8 per cent worldwide.

An exhaustive investigation by *The Independent* in 1995 showed that in the previous 10 years News International, News Corp's UK arm, had paid only £11.74m on profits of nearly £1bn – a rate of just 1.2 per cent when corporation tax was running at 33 per cent.

In comparison, the Telegraph group had paid 29 per cent tax, the Mirror Group 20 per cent and United News and Media, owners of the Express titles, 29 per cent.

Now, however, the tax authorities internationally have had enough. *The Independent* has learnt that senior revenue investigators from the United States, the UK, Australia and Canada met in Sydney in December to examine Mr Murdoch's international network

of tax avoidance. They were stung into action by last year's results, in which News Corp reported paying worldwide taxes of \$103m (£62.42m) on operating profits of \$1.32bn (£800m), a rate of just 7.8 per cent. In a recent analysis of News Corp's taxation compared with similar media corpora-

tions, the *Washington Post* discovered a huge gap between Mr Murdoch's company payments and the rest.

The Walt Disney corporation paid 28 per cent tax; Viacom Inc, parent company of MTV and Paramount Pictures, paid 22 per cent; and Time Warner, which is similar in size

and make-up to News Corp, paid 17 per cent taxes.

So how does Mr Murdoch do it? His success in legally avoiding taxation lies in the truly global nature of his business interests. By shifting profits and losses, by making loans between companies, by claiming tax-relief on interest repay-

ments, by channelling profits through subsidiaries in offshore tax havens and by taking advantage of currency fluctuations his accountants can turn profits into apparent losses.

His empire at the end of last year comprised 789 businesses in 52 countries from Australia and Mauritius to Britain and

Cuba. In America, News Corp's portfolio includes 22 television stations, the huge Fox broadcast network and the 20th Century Fox movie studios. In the UK, it owns the *Times* and *Sunday Times*, the *Sun* and *News of the World*, and a controlling stake in BSkyB. There are also a myriad titles across five continents and a satellite network that covers much of Europe, Asia and America.

It was the breadth of Mr Murdoch's interests that prompted the Australian tax authorities to call December's meeting, during which the investigators attempted to cross the national boundaries that normally restrict their operations.

"No one is happy with the way Mr Murdoch is behaving," said a source close to the investigation. "The [investigators] are querying whether he legitimately makes a loss or not.

A plan has been put into place to tackle his empire.

The problem the tax authorities have with Murdoch is that he has all the facts about everything in his empire but if you are an investigator in the UK, you can only find out about the UK business; if you are an investigator in the US, then you can only look at the US end."

It is understood the task force will examine three ways in which News Corp manipulates its tax affairs:

● Tax relief claimed on debt interest repayments.

● The differences in accounting principles in the various countries in which tax are filed.

● News Corp's use of offshore tax havens. Its annual tax bill is reduced by channelling profits through subsidiaries in no-tax or low-tax havens such as the Cayman Islands.

Satellite channel announces digital TV revolution – quietly

BSkyB outlined its timetable for the digital TV revolution yesterday, but revealed little about precisely what it plans to serve up to the viewing public.

Cautiously unveiling plans for its digital satellite service yesterday, BSkyB admitted that its June launch will be a fairly modest affair.

"The meaningful launch will be in the fourth quarter," said Mark Booth, the company's chief executive, confirming that a major marketing push, to be devised by advertising agency M&C

Saatchi, is scheduled for the peak Christmas sales period.

Outlining the company's interim results to the press and City analysts, Mr Booth said: "Sky's digital launch is on schedule and on budget... It will be one of the big consumer product launches of 1998 and will certainly revolutionise the way we look at television." He added:

"The savvy media players are saying this is a great moment in time and we agree." BSkyB's supremo enthused about the "near video on demand" element, which

promises to bring the equivalent of a multiplex cinema into our living rooms. A selection of hit movies will be constantly replayed at 30 minute intervals, allowing digital satellite subscribers "the chance to watch what they want when they want."

Interactive home shopping and home banking will also be available from June, Mr Booth said.

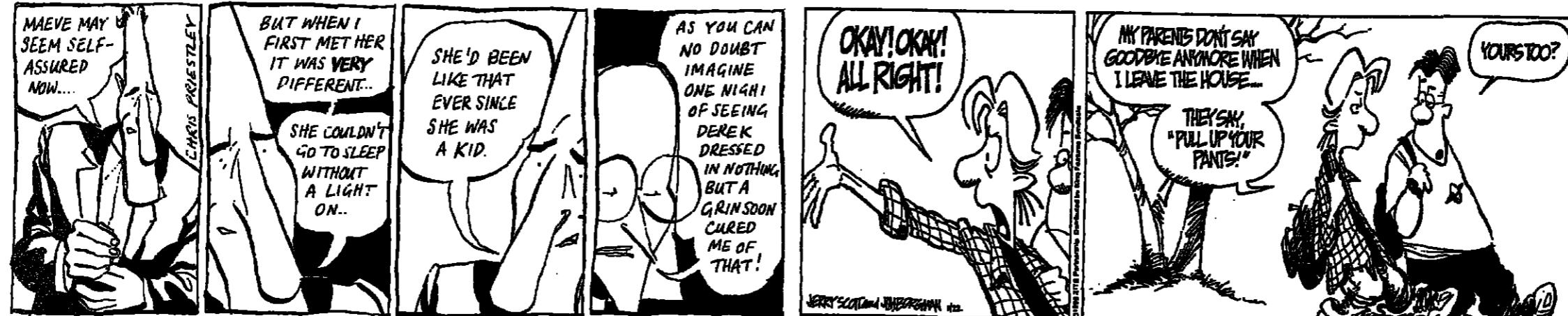
The first set-top boxes will hit the high street stores in June, when they are expected to retail for around £200.

— Rob Brown, Media Editor

7.30 FOR 8

by Chris Priestley ZITS

by Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman



CONTENTS

Home news	2-9
Foreign news	10-13
Theatre	14
Fashion	15
Features	16
Obituaries	17
Leader; letters	18
Comment	19
Business	20-23
Unit trusts	24
Sport	25-28
Crosswords	32
& The Eye	9
Games	The Eye, 9
Weather	The Eye, 10
TV and Radio	The Eye, 11, 12

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Retail's future: shop until you drop, then do it again

Britain's biggest home shopping company yesterday made a £1.6bn takeover bid for Argos, the high street catalogue retailer.

The move is part of a trend towards "multi-channel" retailing under which shopping companies will target consumers using a variety of methods including high street shops, catalogues and new media such as interactive television. Nigel Cope, City Correspondent, reports.

The takeover offer has come from Great Universal Stores, which is best known as a traditional operator of "big book" catalogues such as Kay's and Choice as well as the Berry brand of upmarket clothing.

One of the key reasons behind its Argos bid, is that GUS wants to target customers using as many different methods as possible. It is already Britain's market leader in catalogue shopping. If it succeeds in buying Argos it will control 400 shops up and down the country and be able to assemble an even better database of customers' shopping habits.

It is also in talks with television companies about selling its goods via television channels as the digital television era gets under way later this year.

"Most retailers will be multi-channel," says Lord Wolfson, chairman of GUS. "They are all simply ways of communicating with customers and giving them the widest possible choice."

Many retailers are adopting similar strategies. Asda is keen to launch its own television channel - it wants to use a QVC-style format to sell its

non-food ranges - and Littlewoods is trying to assemble a consortium of retailers to run a TV channel, possibly to coincide with the launch of digital television later this year.

Marks & Spencer is moving into mail-order shopping with its clothing ranges. The Burton Group, which is now known as Arcadia and owns chain stores like Top Shop, Dorothy Perkins and Principles, has launched a range of catalogues for each of its main trading formats. Meanwhile a host of retailers are already successfully selling their products over the Internet.

Industry experts suggest that "cash rich, time poor" consumers will increasingly be willing to pay a little extra for the convenience of home shopping.

Argos represents a good target for a catalogue group seeking high street exposure. Its 400 shops tend to be slightly off the high street but still attract millions of shoppers with its offer of top brand names at low prices. It has a strong brand name and is also a "destination shop" for anyone seeking a new kettle or toys for Christmas. But the group has been under pressure recently as rivals have eaten away at its key markets of toys, jewellery and small electrical appliances.

Analysis has suggested that while Argos was a popular place to shop during the recession because of its low prices, some customers have been deterred by its functional shops and relatively low levels of service. Some have also criticised the system of purchasing under which customers have to fill in order forms, queue to pay and then queue again at another counter to collect the items.

Argos, meanwhile, has rejected the GUS bid as "opportunistic." It is in an awkward position as its chief executive is seriously ill and is undergoing a course of treatment.



Michael Chow portrayed: Top, Keith Haring's M Chow as Green Prawn in a Bowl of Noodle (1986); left, Double Happiness Buddha signed and marked with dollar signs by Andy Warhol (1982); right, photograph by Francesco Scavullo (1978)

Tying the knot in the dome of delight

Couples may be able to exchange millennial wedding vows in Peter Mandelson's dome, it was revealed yesterday. But, Fran Abrams reports, buildings licensed for civil weddings must be both dignified and permanent. Will the Greenwich exhibition fit the bill?

There will be surfball games. There will be the chance to scramble inside a huge human body. And now - maybe - there will be nuptials.

The New Millennium Experience Company, in charge of the dome, has confirmed it is thinking of setting aside a part of its building for couples who want a novel place to tie the knot.

The owner of a suitable building must simply apply to his or her local authority, leaving time for an inspection and a 21-day grace period to allow objections to be made.

However, the criteria for the type of building that can be used raises more questions. Premises must "observe the dignity of the occasion," the guidance says.

"Suitable premises may include hotels, stately homes, civic buildings and other similarly prestigious premises. This means that marriages will not be able to take place in the open air, in a tent, marquee or any other temporary structure."

So, is a dome with a 25-year lifespan permanent enough for marriage? A spokeswoman for its local authority, the London Borough of Greenwich, thought it probably would be.

"A civil ceremony is something quite serious and we

wouldn't want anything frivolous, but if it was a suitable proposal we would look at it. We can't see any problem regarding the temporary nature of the building," she said.

Discussions are continuing on the provision of a religious site within the dome, but this will be separate from any place set aside for secular weddings.

The NMEC's spokesman said that the Lambeth Group, a committee of advisers overseen by the Archbishop of Canterbury, had said that it would be difficult to provide a church, chapel or temple within the dome. Any such site would need to be multi-faith and there was no precedent for a church which embraced Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Hindu and Sikh religions.

Instead, it was likely that a room would be set aside for prayer and quiet reflection by people of all faiths.



Bliss under the Dome? Photomontage: Jonathan Anstee

Agony aunt gets it wrong over gays

An article in which Anne Atkins, the newspaper agony aunt and vicar's wife, claimed that "a gay man is 17 times more likely to be a paedophile than a straight man" has been criticised by the Press Complaints Commission.

The polemic, published in the Sun, was judged to have failed to distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact. Seven people had complained to the commission.

Ms Atkins, who normally writes for the *Daily Telegraph*, first shot to national prominence when she used Radio 4's "Thought for the Day" slot to accuse the Church of England of being soft on gays.

She and her clergyman husband, Stuham, were also in the news recently when their 12-year-old daughter disappeared

from their home in south-west London. She was reunited with her parents 36 hours later.

Both Ms Atkins and the Sun had stood by their recent offending article, citing academic research to support the assertions. But the complainants maintained that she had drawn upon American studies which were flawed.

They were also outraged by her suggestion that "the life expectancy of a gay man without HIV is a shocking 43 years". A government written answer confirmed that such a statistic had no official foundation since a person's sexuality is not recorded at death registration.

The Sun had offered to publish a clarification, but this was rejected by the commission as inadequate.

— Rob Brown, Media Editor

experts

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HALIFAX

Get a little extra help.

Blair intervention saves Barts from closure

Yesterday's decision to save St Bartholomew's hospital, Britain's oldest, was hailed as a triumph by some and an act of political cowardice by others. Jeremy Lawrence and Anthony Bevis chart the bitter disagreements that lay behind the move.

The decision to save Barts was taken by Tony Blair in the face of opposition from the Treasury and some of his personal advisers, it emerged yesterday.

The Prime Minister, whose three children were born at the hospital, pledged shortly after he took over as Labour leader that the facilities at Barts should be "preserved forever".

Ignoring protests that running two teaching hospitals in one of the most deprived areas of the country would swallow resources needed for GP and community care, he answered an appeal from Frank Dobson, Secretary of State for Health, that in the 50th anniversary year of the NHS a Labour government could not close one of the world's best-known hospitals.

Mr Dobson announced in the Commons yesterday that Barts would continue providing its current range of specialist services for seven to eight years while a new 900-bed hospital is built on the Whitechapel site of the Royal London hospital.

It would then become a specialist centre for heart and cancer patients similar to the Royal Marsden and Royal Brompton hospitals in west London. The decision is in line with recommendations in the review of London's health services, commissioned by the Government last June and published yesterday.

Consultants and patients at Barts were delighted that the five-year campaign to save it had succeeded, but GPs warned that it could spell disaster for the local community.

Mike Besser, professor of medicine at the hospital who spearheaded the campaign in its early stages, celebrated yesterday with Brian Sedgemoore, the local MP. "It is a great day. Barts will be here forever," he said.



Continuing care: A nurse takes a patient's blood pressure at St Bartholomew's hospital which is now facing a much brighter future

Photograph: Tom Pilston

The hospital, founded in 1123, has survived an attempt by Henry VIII to sell it off. German bombs during the war, and now the 1993 decision of the previous government to axe it following the Tomlinson review of London's health services. The accident and emergency department was closed in 1995.

The Tomlinson review concluded that London had too many hospital beds compared with the rest of the country and recommended 2,500 should close.

Because of Barts' location, between Guy's to the south, the Royal London to the east and University College to the west, it became the target.

The new review, chaired by Sir Leslie Turnberg, former

president of the Royal College of Physicians, has concluded that London is no longer overbedded. Mr Dobson told the Commons: "The Government has therefore abandoned the presumption we inherited from our predecessors that London is overprovided with acute hospital beds. As a result

any future changes in bed numbers will be in line with those in the rest of the country."

The saving of Barts is, however, the second-best of two options put forward in the review. The first option, which the review panel describe as "the favoured solution clinically" would involve closing Barts and centralising its facilities in a new 1,200-bed hospital on the

Whitechapel site. However, the panel members feared that a new hospital of that size, which would have been the largest to be built in Europe for 20 years, was unrealistic. They feared that, if it were scaled down and Barts was still closed, that would be the "worst possible outcome".

To avoid this they proposed the two-site solution, retaining Barts as a specialist hospital. But they warn: "The key question is how much more expensive would it be to run a two-site versus a one-site operation?"

No figures were forthcoming from ministers yesterday, but a spokeswoman for the Royal Hospitals Trust, which favoured closing Barts, said it had been estimated at an extra £25m a year.

£140m boost for health care in London

Two members of the five strong London review panel are understood to have had second thoughts after they agreed the final report last November. Although they put their names to the recommendation that Barts should close they later said they believed the extra cost of maintaining Barts would be better invested in GP and health services in the capital which are among the worst in the country.

Yesterday, Frank Dobson recognised their concerns by announcing an extra £140m for those services over the next four years, with £30m allocated next year, although this will not be new money and will be taken from elsewhere in the NHS budget. He added that he was accepting all

the other recommendations of the review.

The panel looked at hospitals across the capital but with particular emphasis on three, including Barts. In south-west London, Queen Mary's hospital is to be replaced by a community hospital. In east London, it favoured developing a new hospital at Oldchurch hospital, rather than Harold Wood.

Mr Dobson said the proposals "provide a firm foundation for a 10-year programme to provide London with a modern and dependable health service". But John Maples, the Tories' health spokesman, said: "This is not saving Barts, but saving face for Labour."

— Jeremy Lawrence, Health Editor

Boys, 10, cleared of rape

Two 10-year-old boys accused of raping a nine-year-old girl were cleared yesterday. The Old Bailey jury acquitted the two boys, who were believed to have been Britain's youngest rape defendants, after a direction on the evidence by the judge, Mrs Justice Bracewell.

Another 10-year-old boy was also cleared of indecent assault in the alleged attack at the boys' primary school in May last year.

Mrs Justice Bracewell told the jury that there was a "two-fold" reason for directing that there was no evidence for them to consider over the rape allegations.

One was that in the case of one of the boys accused of rape, the alleged victim "did not positively identify him". More fundamentally, said the judge, was the fact that during a police interview with the girl a police officer had "asked a question that was both leading and wholly improper, which in effect put words into the girl's mouth".

A third boy alleged to have raped her could not be prosecuted as he was just nine at the time and under the age of criminal responsibility.

The two boys cleared of rape and a fourth boy, an 11-year-old cousin of the alleged victim, face a charge of indecent assault and trial continues. All defendants had denied all the charges.

Prescott calls for pedal power

Ministers have been told to "get on your bike" by John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of environment, transport and the regions.

MPs were told yesterday that ministers have been urged in "green guidelines" by the Deputy Prime Minister's department to use public transport for business wherever possible and to walk or use their cycles for short distances.

Unfortunately for the Government's green image, officials at the department could not think of a single minister who currently rides a bike to work.

That is in marked contrast to the Tories, who had the bicycling baronet, Sir George Young, the former transport minister, and David Willetts, a former whip, in the front row of Whitehall push-bikers.

There may be more MPs taking to their bikes. The senior salaries review body last week recommended that MPs should be awarded a bicycle allowance to encourage them to leave their cars in the garage for constituency business.

W African gangs using Internet

West African organised criminals are using the Internet to obtain tens of thousands of names and addresses as targets for fraud, it emerged yesterday.

MIs and MI6 are helping crack down on the criminals, who are mainly Nigerian, responsible for an estimated £3.5bn of fraud in the UK every year as well as drug trafficking.

The National Criminal Intelligence Service has set up a special section to combat the criminals who sent an estimated 1 million letters which seek to con individuals and companies out of money.

— Jason Bennett

Carriers take Whitehall to court over noise limits at airports

Government proposals to turn Heathrow into the quietest major airport in the world are to be challenged by carriers. Randeep Ramesh, Transport Correspondent, reports on the battle to keep Britain's skies quiet.

The world's biggest airlines announced a High Court challenge yesterday against tough new government noise limits for aircraft leaving from Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports.

Robert Ayling, the chief executive of

British Airways, has already warned ministers that the controversial proposed limits would cost the flag carrier £230m a year — a third of its profits.

According to the directors of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the move would see Paris and Madrid replacing Heathrow as London's main international airport. Last year Heathrow handled more than 56 million passengers in 12 months.

"We have been to see ministers in Europe and they have listened. The British government were completely unsympathetic," said William Gaillard, a director of IATA. Mr Gaillard said that IATA lawyers

would be seeking leave for a judicial review of the Government's proposals later this week.

The new limits, put forward in a consultation paper last November, would force passenger jets to be at least three decibels quieter than at present during the day, and only emit 87 decibels at night.

"It is technically unfeasible," said Mr Gaillard. "No plane can meet these targets — not even the latest jets."

Mr Gaillard added that the lower limits would rule out many airlines' most profitable services — which see jets leaving fully loaded from Heathrow to destinations in Asia and South America.

IATA says that airlines will instead divert aircraft to European capitals and then see passengers taking smaller, quieter planes to London.

"There is plenty of space at other European hubs. Madrid has the go-ahead for five runways and Paris for four," said Mr Gaillard.

Airlines have already delayed the introduction of the limits, which were first proposed in 1996. In April last year, IATA won a high court case which forced ministers to reconsider their original plans.

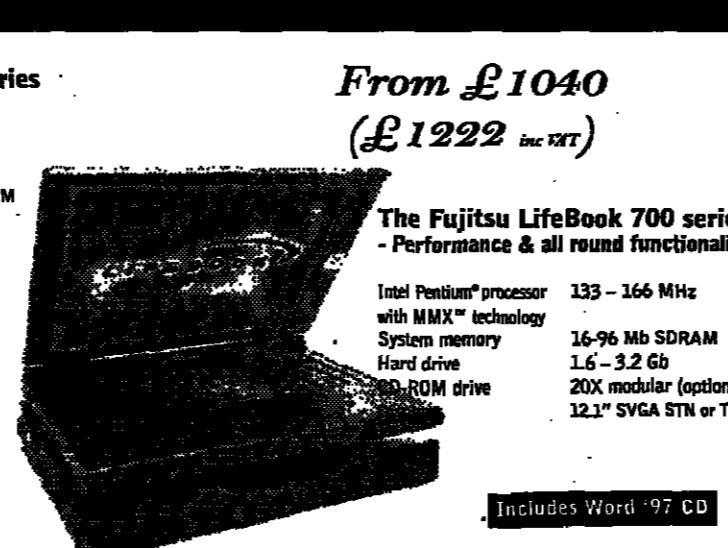
But despite vigorous lobbying from Mr Ayling, who advises the Government on the Millennium Dome and who is personally

close to the Prime Minister, transport ministers have refused to budge. The industry has pointed out that the only aircraft which could meet the new limits are the latest Boeing 777s — which currently ferry passengers to the Caribbean and the Middle East.

These limits would mean that aircraft like the jumbo [Boeing 747] would be unsuitable to fly with the current passenger numbers they carry," said Max Kingsley-Jones, commercial aviation editor of Flight Magazine.

The Government remains unmoved. "Our position has not changed from the previous government's," said a spokesman for the Department of the Environment.

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Cool Britannia begins to go cold on trendy Blair

Has Cool Britannia turned its back on Blair? A leading style guru has dismissed Labour's attempts to schmooze with the glitterati, while one of Britain's leading theatrical figures has again attacked Labour for not supporting the arts. Fran Abrams and David Lister report on dissent among those whom Blair would like to call his own.

In a bizarre twist of events, the head of a top fashion house gave a lecture to a right-wing think-tank last night to complain that the Prime Minister was trying too hard to be trendy.

Wayne Hemingway, chairman of Red or Dead, told the Social Market Foundation that attempts to "rebrand" Britain as the epicentre of coolness were just "sad".

"By simply inviting a few (mostly naff) pop stars and comedians to drinkies at Number Ten, the very people Blair is trying to impress will be turned off," he said. "It brings to mind those sad pictures of Harold Wilson with the Beatles and it certainly didn't enamour Harold Wilson to British youth."

Showing "corny" repeated pictures of raving at the Ministry of Sound" to denote coolness was the 1990s equivalent of "god-awful" 1970s postcards of King's Road punks, he added. Most of Labour's young MPs were less youthful than his grandmother, and she died three years ago.

"Forward-thinking can live side-by-side with heritage. Let the parties of retired middle Americans with their sad anoraks and check slacks soak up our heritage while their

grandchildren discover a more youthful Britain," he suggested.

Mr Hemingway believes there is a widespread backlash against the Labour government in the creative industries.

Posing for photocalls is all very well, but nothing is being offered in return, he told *The Independent*.

"At the moment we are seeing absolutely tons of publicity saying 'Aren't I cool and trendy, there's no other government as cool and trendy in the world.' They have got to start proving

Then last Sunday Alan McGee, the founder of Creation Records and a £50,000 donor to Labour before the election, told *The Observer* that Tony Blair was "all surface".

Ten days ago Sir Peter Hall, the theatre director, used an awards ceremony attended by Chris Smith, Secretary of state for Culture, Media and Sport, to bitterly attack the Government's Arts Council funding cut. Yesterday, Sir Peter accused the Government of "dumbing down Britain" by minimising arts teaching in primary schools. He made his remarks as he launched the theatrical world's own education initiative at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in the West End of London.

The other thing the Government has done is take music, art and drama off the priority list in primary schools, which I think is awful. This awful thing will lead to the dumbing down of the nation. So we shan't need any art galleries, theatres or opera houses, which of course would be a great benefit from a cost-savings point of view," he told an audience of actors and supporters.

Twelve leading directors and actors are giving their services free to offer talks and master-classes to drama students and secondary school pupils hoping to enter the profession.

Afterwards Sir Peter said Labour's arts policy filled him with "utter dismay". A friendly peer had asked him "not to rock the boat", he disclosed. "But I said 'Where is the boat? I don't see a boat labelled Labour arts policy'."

It was important young people should have no illusions about life in the theatre, he said, adding: "Being in the theatre isn't about glamour, easy options and easy money – it's about hard work, crucial discipline and often no money at all."

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Mr Hemingway's assault on new Labour's street cred is the latest in a string of attacks from the world of fashion, design and pop and the theatre.

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Image: Advertising Archives

Car magazine puts women in the driving seat for first time

Britain's first motoring magazine for women is to be launched in the spring. Clare Gumer gets a test drive.

In 1996, more women than men aged between 18 and 25 bought new cars. By 1999 the industry expects women between 18 and 40 to be the dominant consumers in the car market. Women buy cars, love their cars, but they do not read about cars. *Nuts about Motoring*, the forthcoming female-friendly motoring magazine,

believes it has spotted a gap in the market.

Helen Mound, the editor, is planning to "stick two perfectly manicured fingers up at magazines which rave on about cars that snap knicker elastic at five paces and compare automotive curves with Daryl Hannah's curves". She says that she is catering for people who "enjoy motoring as motorists, not as testosterone-driven imbeciles".

Nuts about Motoring hopes to attract around 90,000 female readers who are alienated by the existing car press. "Unimaginative sexual innu-

endoes designed to insult, ridicule or merely dig at the fairer sex have been far too easy for the motoring press since the first car company stuck a dolly bird on its new car in the Fifties," said Ms Mound, whose husband edits the magazine *Performance Car*. "You know, a girl on the bonnet of a big, red sports car is erotic, but you know, a girl driving the same car is a damn sight more erotic."

The magazine is aimed at car-owning female drivers between 21 and 40. The average reader would own a one-year-old car worth £8,000-£12,000,

but aspires to exchange it in due course for one worth £15,000-30,000. She favours style and speed of cars, but is "smart with her money". She enjoys driving and sees herself as competent behind the wheel. She is likely to be independent – the number of single women aged 18 to 40 rose from 18 to 28 per cent from 1980 to 1990 – and successful – 45 per cent of female graduates find work within six months compared with 40 per cent of men.

Among the contributors will be Vicki Butler-Henderson, co-presenter of BBC2's motoring programme *Top Gear*, with a column "From lipstick to dipstick".

Angela Giveon, the magazine's managing editor, said: "We know the market. We make no apologies about being female. We intend to cover interesting topics and teach women the art of negotiation. It is not patronising. It will save them money."

"A car is the second biggest purchase a woman makes after her home. Men are expected to know about these things, but women haven't got the media to address them," Ms Giveon said.

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Blair: Ulster killings may go on even after settlement

The possibility of Northern Ireland extremists continuing their killing, even after a political settlement has been agreed, is built into the Government's strategic thinking on the peace process. Anthony Bevins, Political Editor, reports Tony Blair's views.

is now under way. That is the next big juncture for people making their choices. And the second thing is clearly that you then put that in a referendum to the people of Northern Ireland. There will be a referendum in the Republic of Ireland, too.

It is not a statement of the obvious that if you get both those things done, you are through and home and dry. But I think that if those two things are done, it becomes virtually impossible for anyone to argue that the will of the people has not been clear.

However, the Prime Minister then added: "If you manage to do that, it doesn't avoid the situation that a few extremists get back on to killing people, you can never tell; the history of Northern Ireland is that people are prepared to do that irrespective of whether there is any popular support for what they are doing at all.

"But I think it makes it very difficult for anyone who is engaged in violence to achieve any form of respectability once these two things have happened.

It is important to realise that that is a very clear strategic objective; that you have got to get to the stage where you have built such a strong set of democratic ramparts, if you like, around the situation there, that they cannot be stormed any longer by fanatics who want to wage war on the democratic process."

As for the recent spate of killings, Mr Blair said: "It is very difficult to have any policy of law enforcement that can deal with a situation where somebody just walks up to a taxi cab rank and shoots dead the first taxi driver they see. What do you do with people like that? We have just got to keep on working at the process..."

The May deadline for agreement on the Northern Ireland peace process remains "realistic", and the Government was continuing to work towards it, the Prime Minister's official spokesman said yesterday.

On the eve of his visit to Washington, Mr Blair told American correspondents in London that President Clinton had been "as solid as a rock" in his support for the peace process, and relations with the Republic of Ireland had never been better.

The Prime Minister told the *Washington Post* that he was more optimistic than he had been a week ago, though he was careful not to bank on a breakthrough.

"It would be an immense historical achievement if we were to lay to rest hundreds of years of bloodshed and division," he said, "but I remain stubbornly optimistic [that] it is possible to do so, but that may just be my nature rather than reality..."

Mr Blair gave a remarkably frank rundown on the process in his briefing with the American correspondents. "I think the two big things really are, first, to get an outline agreement of a lasting settlement and that is a matter of detailed negotiation that



Mo Mowlam at a press call after the exclusion from the London talks of the Ulster Democratic Party

Mowlam's dream of talks with no press

Mo Mowlam would like to take Gerry Adams, David Trimble and the other Ulster leaders to a remote island to try and reach a peace settlement. Colin Brown, Chief Political Correspondent, reports that a venue in Scandinavia is more likely.

the final session when you get down to real negotiations," said a Dublin source.

"There is a feeling around that if you lock them up in the same room, you can make progress."

Mo Mowlam became convinced during the three days when the talks switched to London that the press was becoming one of the obstacles to making progress towards agreement between the parties. The SDLP delegation also complained that the press were becoming part of the problem.

In the privacy of the negotiating room at Lancaster House, the party leaders dropped their public animosity and got down to business.

But after each session, each of the parties would brief the press against the others at the talks. Gerry Adams claimed that Ken Maginnis, a member of Mr Trimble's team, had refused to speak to him, saying: "I don't speak to murderers."

Ms Mowlam felt the talks had gone well, but the impression in much of the live television coverage was that they were going badly. She has privately felt exasperated at the "bandstanding" of the parties for the benefit of the cameras.

The talks are due to reconvene in a fortnight in Dublin. Ms Mowlam has joked about hosting the final talks on an island in the Arctic but that would not stop the Ulster leaders posturing to the polar bears.

Armed forces will be exempt from the minimum wage

The armed forces are to be excluded from the minimum wage, the industry minister Ian McCartney announced yesterday.

The move represented a defeat for the Department of Trade and Industry in the face of demands from the Ministry of Defence that soldiers, sailors and airmen should be treated as exceptional cases.

As *The Independent* reported last December, the DTI put up a strong resistance to the claims. It feared that if the forces were

allowed to opt out then other groups would demand similar treatment.

Three weeks ago the President of the Board of Trade, Margaret Beckett, wrote to the Conservative industry spokesman John Redwood to confirm that the Bill would cover "all workers in the UK above compulsory school age". But yesterday, Mr McCartney told the standing committee on the National Minimum Wage Bill that he expected to announce details of the exemption soon.

MoD officials said that it would be hard to allocate an hourly minimum to those in the forces because they were paid a daily rate 365 days a year, reflecting the fact that they were always available for duty. Similar exemptions already existed in the United States and some other European countries.

A spokesman for the DTI confirmed that the Government had put down an amendment to the Bill because of the "unique circumstances" of serving personnel.

The Government withdrew a clause on serving personnel from the committee stage discussions of the Bill so that MPs could have more time to debate it later, a Government spokesman said.

Mr Redwood said that the announcement represented a victory for new Labour over old Labour. "Why is it a Tommy not worth the minimum wage?" he asked. "Mrs

Beckett has been humiliated by the Secretary of State for Defence. She did not wish to exempt our troops but she's been forced to do so.

"This will not be the last retreat she is going to make over this dangerous terrain," he added.

Diane Abbott, the Labour MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, described the development as "worrying".

"Once you allow an exemption you are

opening the door to a flood of others," she said.

David Chidgey, Liberal Democrat trade spokesman, said: "We need to consider the armed forces as a separate issue but the fact that the Government is coming to the committee at a late stage to put forward a timetabling shows that they have not thought this through in advance."

—Fran Abrams,
Political Correspondent

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A special discount is available

Drought warning turns into a damp squib as water levels return

Across England, a year of above-average rainfall has ended the drought, leaving reservoirs brimful, rivers with healthy flows and water tables rising. Even the water companies came close to accepting that water is no longer in short supply, says Nichols Schoon, Environment Correspondent.

With hindsight, the drought cracked last February when England and Wales had nearly half as much above the average rainfall for that month. That followed a remarkably dry January when the clouds delivered a meagre 17 per cent of the month's long-term average rainfall.

But that was the end of it. Seven of the past 12 months have had above-average rainfall. In the year up to the end of January, Meteorological Office records show that England and Wales have had 3 per cent above an average year's rainfall.

The rain has returned almost everywhere. Only one region, the rainy North-west, has had less than its average yearly rainfall over the past 12 months.

Most rivers have normal or

above-normal flows for the time of year, the Government's Environment Agency says. The majority of the water companies are reporting that their reservoirs are fuller than usual for this time of year, with drought-prone Southern saying its reservoirs are 100 per cent full.

"There's no doubt that the substantial rainfall has brought to an end the historic, 30 months dry period," said a spokesman for the Water Services Association, which represents nine of the 10 big water companies. But it is still appealing for customers not to use water wastefully, and says that it is hoping for the next three months to have average or above-average rainfall in order for groundwater levels to return to normal everywhere.

None the less, nearly 3 million people are still covered by hose-pipe or sprinkler bans, or both. Southern Water said it was "almost certain" to lift its sprinkler ban covering 800,000 people in parts of East and West Sussex within weeks.

Neither Essex and Suffolk Water, nor Sutton and East Surrey Water, in south London, have any short-term plans to lift their bans, which cover 1.7 million people and 270,000 respectively. Both said groundwater sources they relied on were still extremely low for the time of year.

Frozen asset: The River Ver iced over at Redbourn in Hertfordshire yesterday, but a few years ago it had completely dried up

Photograph: Brian Harris



Prophets of gloom confounded

"The South-east of England will face a very difficult summer if we do not get at least 75 per cent of normal winter rainfall," – Dr Geoff Mance, water management chief of the Government's Environment Agency, November 1997. It did.

"There's no way we can say the drought is over," – Mike Walker, head of policy for the Water Companies Association, July 1997. He was speaking after the wettest June in more than 100 years.

"We would expect less rain to fall here as the climate changes world-wide, but not this much – it's already greater than we'd anticipate," – Dr Geoffrey Jenkins of the Meteorological Office's Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction, May 1997.

"Our climate is inherently capricious, but lately it does seem to have been moving towards the extremes of its range," – Terry Marsh, of the Institute of Hydrology, April 1997.

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Ministers delay ban on raw milk

Moves to ban the sale of raw milk have been delayed, the Government has announced. Heavy representation by industry and consumers has forced the Ministry of Agriculture to put off its decision. Glenda Cooper, Consumer Affairs Correspondent reports.

The Government's proposal to ban the sale of raw cows' milk has been postponed after ministers decided to extend the consultation period.

The decision was taken after the ministry received requests from many small businesses to extend it, blaming the Christmas break for making it difficult for farmers to comment. The ministry said it was extending the consultation period on the proposed ban by three weeks so the new deadline for comments will be 24 February.

"It is important that there is adequate opportunity for all raw milk producers and consumers to have the chance to make their views known," said Jeff Rooker, the food safety

minister. "Protecting consumers remains our first priority but in these exceptional circumstances we have extended the consultation period."

The move comes amid criticism of the Government's decision to ban sales of beef on the bone, imposed after a consultation period of only seven days.

The milk ban in England was proposed last November following advice to ministers from independent scientists that the untreated milk could contain potentially harmful bacteria. Letters were sent out to 180 representative organisations and interested parties. Similar consultation exercises are taking place in Wales and Northern Ireland. The sale of raw cows' drinking milk has been banned in Scotland since 1983.

It sparked opposition from farmers who claim labels already ensure consumers are warned about the risks of drinking the milk. Sir Julian Rose, chairman of the Association of Unpasteurised Milk Producers and Consumers, said: "Some half a million consumers enjoy the taste of real milk fresh and unprocessed. Some suffer from allergies aggravated by the pasteurised equivalent and any ban will mean they will have to stop drinking milk altogether."

"It is important that there is adequate opportunity for all raw milk producers and consumers to have the chance to make their views known," said Jeff Rooker, the food safety

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Morals, tables and technology: why this is the best junior school in Britain

Frank Haverty, the head teacher of St Thomas More primary school in Coventry, is happy to describe himself as someone who has worn the same style clothes for more than 20 years, until they came back into fashion.

St Thomas More has itself continued to use relatively traditional teaching methods despite the dominance of progressive education for much of the time since Mr Haverty became head teacher in 1971. Set in a suburb of the city, the Roman Catholic school is one of 159 schools which gained an excellent report from the education watchdog and which have been named in the Chief Inspector of Schools' annual report.

The school's Ofsted report, published last June, said that most of its 380 pupils achieved well above the standards expected nationally in core subjects, including English, maths and science. Progress in other subjects was also praised as was the behaviour of the children, and their attitudes to learning and moral development.

Forty-five per cent of teaching was described as very good or excellent and 95 per cent was said to be sound. Mr Haverty and his governors believe that religious ethos is the basis of the school's success.

valuing the individual whilst making children aware of the importance of other people. This is supported by a teaching style which includes traditional techniques such as learning multiplication tables by heart and whole-class teaching, although the school also uses modern methods like group work. It has absorbed a number of up-to-date ideas and has invested around £12,000 in a computer suite. The school's approach is backed by well-motivated staff, and a partnership with parents and the local community.

St Thomas More primary has a mixed catchment area that includes many middle-class children. Only about 8 per cent of pupils have free school meals, compared with a national average of 16 per cent.

The school has a nursery on site which was built by Coventry City Council. The council spends more on education than the government recommends and this extra funding has helped make budgeting easier, although Mr Haverty said the school could always use more resources.

"We are traditional and make no apologies for that but we are not too rigid," he said. "I always think if anything is too rigid it will snap, so we try to make school fun."

The chairman of the governors,

Monsignor Tom Gavin, said: "We have some dedicated staff and they have really got an acknowledgement for what they have achieved."

Louise Daniels, whose seven-year-old son Stephen and five-year-old daughter Helen go to the school, said: "Teachers just seem to take a really genuine interest in the children, the teachers have good standards and they stick to them." Mrs Daniels' son has mild autism and the school has been very supportive of his special needs.

Mick Kelly, a publican, was pleased with the way his daughters Emma-leigh, aged nine and Nataleigh, aged six, were being taught.

"St Thomas More runs very well, basically because of the strong moral beliefs and good teachers," he said.

James O'Brien, a 10-year-old pupil at the school, said he liked maths and comprehension. "I think all our teachers are very good, she is there if you need help," he said.

Sarah Taberner, also aged 10, said: "My favourite subjects are history and art, my teacher is very good, she explains things to you and she interested me in those subjects."

— Matt Rodda

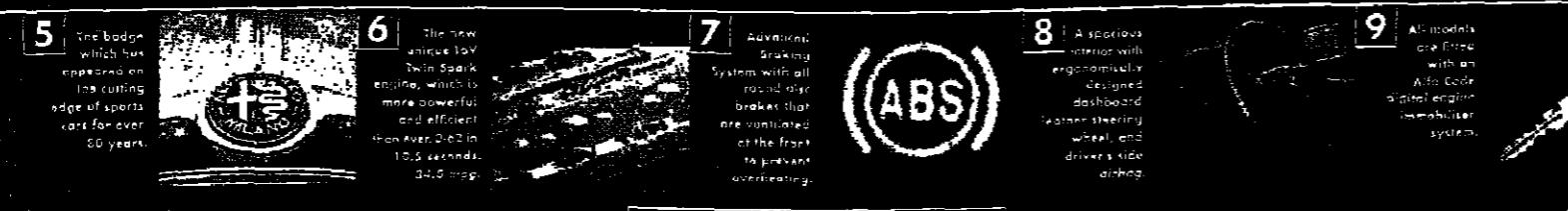


Starting out: Children working in the reception class at St Thomas More school, Coventry

Photograph: Peter Macdiarmid

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Revealed: Thousands allowed to vote under false names

Battered wives, prison warders and police officers are being allowed to vote under assumed names in breach of election rules. Electoral officials revealed to our reporter that the anomaly was one of many in a system which was due for radical overhaul.

A provision for anonymous registration should be introduced to protect people who are genuinely at risk if they allowed their real names to go on the electoral roll, according to electoral officials.

Currently registration officers are taking sympathy on those who claim that they

and their families are at risk from having their addresses made public and bending the rules so that they can still vote. It is believed that many others are sacrificing their suffrage rather than going on the roll.

The *Independent* has been given a list of proposals from the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), which oversees the compilation of the electoral roll throughout the country, which they have put to a government working party on electoral reform being chaired by George Howarth, the Home Office Minister.

Apart from introducing a facility for anonymous registration, they call for trials of electronic voting.

The AEA would also like disabled voters to be allowed to vote away from the polling station crush and would like steps

to be introduced so that blind voters could cast their vote in secret.

John Turner, chairman of the AEA, said: "Change is needed now. Voter turnout must be improved. The election process must be modernised and improved or the organs of government will become more and more remote from the people they claim to represent."

His deputy, Colin Marshall, said: "Each registration officer knows that people are not particularly happy that their details are public knowledge: prison officers, police officers, people at risk from their es-

tranged husbands. Unlike the council tax, there is no anonymous registration, although a number of electoral registration officers get by this."

"Sometimes we put people in their maiden names, or police are put in their wife's maiden name."

He added: "It's technically wrong but I think that many election officers sympathise with people in this position. I personally know of people who have been traced by villains and either had their property vandalised or have been threatened."

The Home Office working party will look

at various ways of improving electoral practices, including registration of the homeless and setting up a continuous or rolling register so that people do not lose their vote if they move home shortly before an election. It will also look at automated voting, whereby voters press a button instead of marking a cross against the name of their chosen candidate. Such electronic methods have been tried in other countries and speed up the counting process.

In its submission, the AEA, expresses the view that Britain has allowed itself to rest on its laurels as the cradle of democracy. "The British electoral system is based on custom and practice going back well over a century. No exhaustive review has been carried out during that time – changes have often been piecemeal, minor

or technical with little direct consequence for the voter."

The *Independent* has also obtained a copy of the latest British electorate figures, compiled by the Treasury.

They show that despite the activity that surrounded the run-up to last May's election, when campaigns like Rock the Vote and Operation Black Vote aimed to attract the missing young and ethnic minority voters, there are still nearly 2 million people missing from the electoral register.

By last February, there were 39,229,038 people registered to vote, an increase of 235,000 from the previous year. But because the population eligible to vote increased by 179,000, the number of missing voters was only reduced by 56,000 to 1,982,434.

Ready to go: (clockwise from left) Antony Price, thought to be in the running for the top Versace post; Sonja Nuttall, lifted by sound financial backing; John Galliano, chief designer at Dior; and Hussein Chalayan, who has signed contracts with Top Shop and the American giant TSE Cashmere

Photographs: Chris Moore/Ben Elwes

the launch of a cosmetics range which needs the publicity and kudos a couture collection brings.

Price has his own small-scale but thriving couture business, based in London. His customers include Tara Palmer-Tomkinson, Patsy Kensit, Jerry Hall and Anjelica Huston. And, like the late Gianni Versace, Antony Price is in the business of creating an illusion of perfection. The safety-pin dress that Liz Hurley wore to the premier of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was the result of clever corsetry. Women, even Liz Hurley, simply do not have bodies that go in and out in exactly the right places. But with a little help from Mr Price, anything is possible.

"If I am given the money to do it, I will not fail," said Price yesterday from his studio where he is working on a collection to be shown at milliner Philip Treacy's show during Fashion Week later this month.

"The terrible thing that has always hampered me is not a lack of ideas ... but money. Putting on a catwalk show is like asking the world to a fantastic party and spending the next five years paying it off." Instead of "staggering around on a British shoe string" the job at Versace would give the resources to bring his ideas to life. "You could do fantastic things there," he says.

— Tamsin Blanchard

After the hype, British fashion lures the serious money

After decades of hype and no substance, London fashion is finally being taken seriously. Last week, Paul Smith, a world player in menswear with sales totalling £165m last year, announced that he would be showing his women's collection on the catwalk for the first time later this month. And he has chosen London as the venue.

Hussein Chalayan, one of our most challenging and innovative designers, announced that he had signed a three-season contract with American giant TSE Cashmere, and has also been signed up to design a capsule collection for the British chain Top Shop – who will in return sponsor his London catwalk show this month. Chalayan's TSE New York collection will be shown on the catwalk at New York Fashion Week at the end of March. The line is expected to make £4m wholesale in the first year.

Meanwhile, Sonja Nuttall, a designer with the potential to be Britain's answer to Jil Sander, has gained sound financial backing and support for her company from British high-street supplier, Intraport.

Young designer Owen Gaster, who has struggled to self-finance his past five collections, has won backing from the Italian manufacturer Casor, who will sponsor his show alongside Bhs. And Antony Price, a fashion legend since the Seventies when he



dressed Roxy Music, Jerry Hall, Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, as well as David Bowie, is the latest in a line of British designers rumoured to be in the running for the job as head of Versace Couture.

The wacky ideas that have made London the creative capital of the fashion world are finally being turned into serious money.

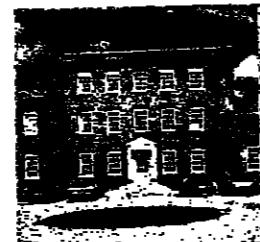
British designers became a viable commercial proposition when John Galliano was given the house of Givenchy to reinvent. Then came Alexander McQueen, also at Givenchy, and Stella McCartney at Chloe. The traditional fashion houses have recognised that to capture affluent young customers and maintain any credi-

bility beyond the millennium they need to buy-in young blood. The British fashion pack is the natural hunting ground.

Antonio Berardi, whose first collection for Italian leather company Ruffo is unveiled in Milan next month, is also rumoured to be up for the Versace job. But gossip links 52-year-old Antony Price with the Italian house.

Price sent samples of his work to Milan in November but says the deal is still "very much up in the air". Donatella Versace appears to be searching for a designer to keep the company's made-to-measure, one-off couture business alive. There has not been an *haute couture* collection for Versace since her brother's death last year, despite

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France's teachers strike against Socialist 'treachery'

Half of the secondary school teachers in France went on strike yesterday to protest against reforms in the Western world's most unwieldy education system. John Lichfield, who has children at a French school, takes the side of the education minister, Claude Allègre.



Jospin: Had teachers' vote

Charlie, aged nearly eight, has just started to learn geometry by heart. The definition of "a line", he intones, is something which goes in one direction for ever: unless you put a capital A at one end and a capital B at the other and then it is not a line at all but only a part of a line.

Turning to his French grammar book, we learn, among other things, that "the ducks have left the region". In his project work - a great innovation in primary schools in France - he and his classmates have been preoccupied, in stupefying horticultural detail, with the "life-cycle of the haricot bean".

On Monday, there was no school: the teachers had declared a "day of concertation", a distressingly regular occur-

rence, when the teachers, as far as we can make out, talk among themselves.

I should add that Charlie loves his school; the discipline, the curriculum, based on a rote-learning more unbending than I experienced in England in the Fifities, appeals to a juvenile sense of order which we had not previously suspected in him. For parents, the system, based on marks out of 10, is reassuringly easy to follow. However, the total absence of creativity, or independent thinking, something which marks French education right up to university level, is startling and disturbing.

Among those that it disturbs is Claude Allègre, the son of teachers, a former university

professor, and now minister for education in the Socialist-led government of Lionel Jospin. Mr Allègre came to office last June with a promise to "take the fat off the mammoth" of the French education system.

He wanted to devolve the legendary central power of the education ministry - one of the largest civilian employers in Europe with 150,000 staff - to allow more decision-making and hiring at local and school level. That would mean altering the age-old system under which teachers were allocated to schools throughout France by committees in Paris (on which the main teaching unions were heavily represented). He criticised the absenteeism of teachers and (horror, for Mr Allègre) their practice of awarding themselves study days in term time.

He also started an inquiry into the curriculum which he described (perfectly) as "too ambitious and not demanding enough". Every French education minister tinkers with the school curriculum but there has been no fundamental change in approach, so it is said, since the 1880s.

Mr Allègre said that he wanted to move towards a

more orderly progression of learning. His researches, to the horror of the teachers, included asking children in French lycées (16- to 18-year-olds) for their opinions.

The whole Allègre programme is seen by many teachers and, crucially, by the unions as a treacherous attack on their status and privileges: treacherous because teachers tend overwhelmingly to vote for the Socialist party and its allies.

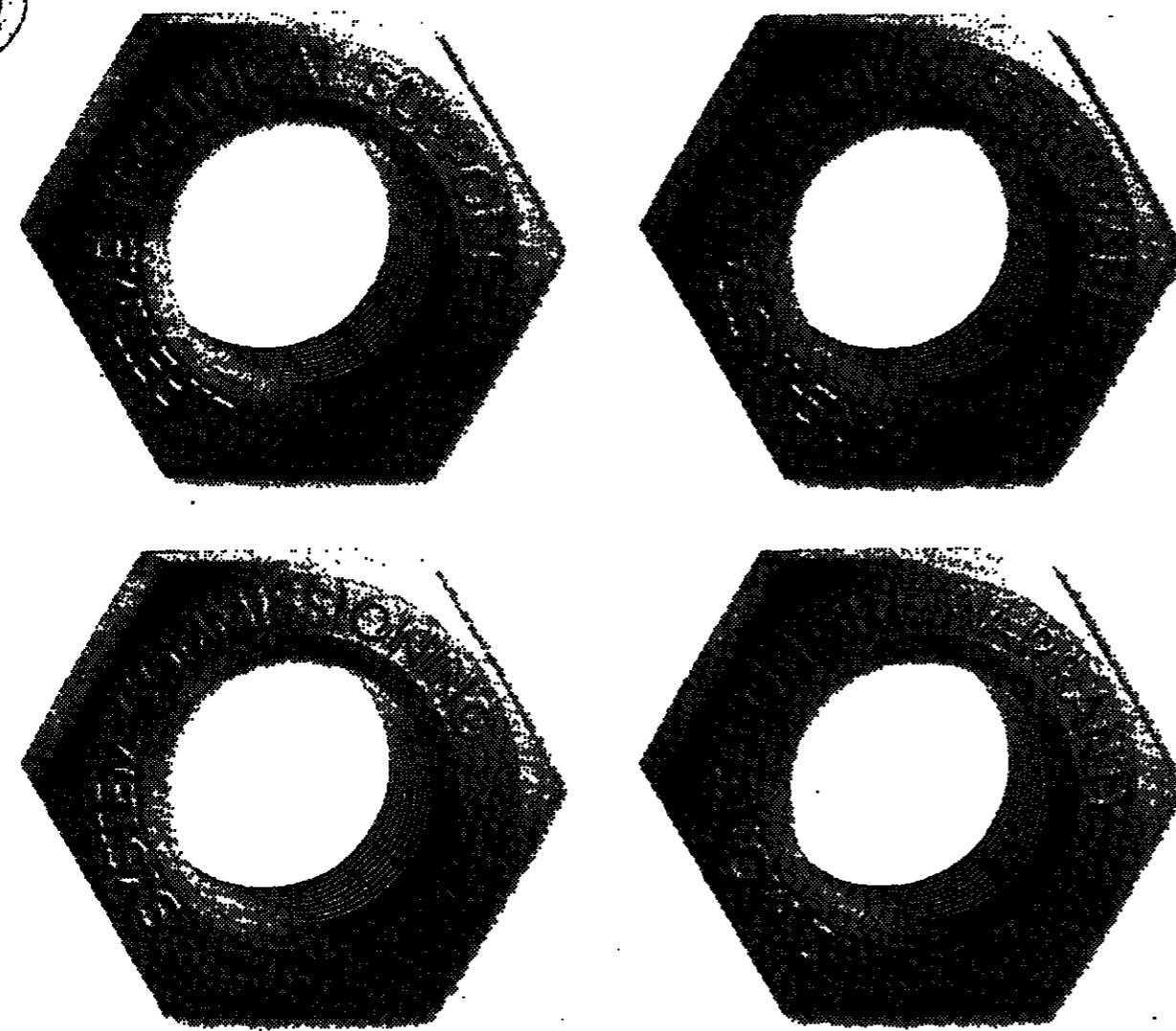
Yesterday's strike - supported by 50 per cent of secondary teachers, not quite as many as the union leaders had hoped for - was the first barrage in what may prove to be a long war. It was aimed at different parts of the Allègre programme according to which union was involved. The largest teaching union, the SNES, is mostly incensed by the plan to decentralise hiring and firing of staff (which would remove much of the union's power).

But the dispute is seen, on both sides, as a battle to preserve acquired rights: a classic example of the mobilisation of the French forces of *immobilism*. It remains to be seen whether Mr Allègre, unlike his timid predecessors, will stick to his guns.



Cat napped: A fireman in Mexico City drags an escaped lioness from under a car after she was spotted on the street by a police patrol. Safely caught, the big cat was taken to Chapultepec Zoo

Photograph: Reuters



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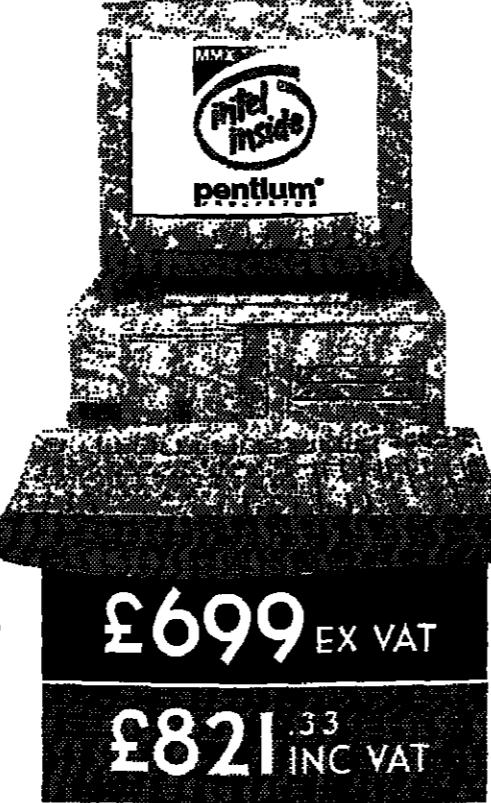
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Bossi talks of armed fight for secession

Telephone taps on Italy's Northern League boss have revealed that Umberto Bossi planned to back up his threat of secession with violence, writes Andrew Gumbel in Rome

possible number of those pieces of s - to the next world."

Although Mr Bossi and his 40 fellow separatists under investigation have yet to be sent to trial, the political world was quick to react to the leaked telephone taps with sentiments of unequivocal condemnation. "These are statements of ex-

north as a Gandhi-style struggle based on non-violence.

Alberto Mazzonetto, the Venice secretary who had the "machine-guns" conversation with Mr Bossi, yesterday tried to explain away the strong language as no more than a joke, and strongly rejected a suggestion by the Verona-based public prosecutor, Guido Papalia, that the League leadership displayed Fascist tendencies.

But numerous public figures yesterday wondered what a magistrate was doing tapping the phone conversations of sitting parliamentarians without permission, and also how evidence supposedly kept *sub judice* could find its way into the columns of the daily press.

Mr Bossi's number two, Roberto Maroni, said his party would consider suing Judge Papalia for violation of the constitution and the law on phone-tapping. The League would also boycott any trial in which its members were involved.

It was hard to tell just how serious the leaks might prove for Mr Bossi. He is known for his flights of florid language, few of which seem to be backed up by concrete signs of menace.

On the other hand, Mr Bossi's rhetoric has sharpened considerably of late. In a recent attack on Rome he described it as being filled with "pigs" and "bastards" - something which this week earned him a libel writ from the city's mayor, Francesco Rutelli.

exceptional seriousness," said Fabio Mussi, parliamentary floor leader of the main government party, the left-wing PDS. "I urge all citizens of the north and especially those who vote for the League to make themselves heard and stop Bossi."

The revelations were a clear embarrassment to the Northern League, which has in recent years stopped all public talk of "oiling the Kalashnikovs" and tried to depict its campaign for independence for the affluent

INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON THE VOTING SYSTEM

The Independent Commission on the Voting System, chaired by Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, is seeking views on alternatives to the current "first-past-the-post" system of elections to the House of Commons.

The Commission would welcome reasoned submissions in writing from any person or organisation interested in the subject.

The Commission's terms of reference are:

"The Commission will be free to consider and recommend any appropriate system or combination of systems in recommending an alternative to the present system for Parliamentary elections to be put before the people in the Government's referendum."

"The Commission shall observe the requirement for broad proportionality, the need for stable government, an extension of voter choice and the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies."

Written submissions should be brief, and sent soon (before the end of February, if at all possible) to the Independent Commission on the Voting System at:

6th Floor, Clive House, Petty France, LONDON SW1H 9HD
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Tamil terror blights Prince's Sri Lanka visit

The Prince of Wales arrived in Sri Lanka yesterday to join in the celebrations of the war-torn country's 50th anniversary of independence. Our correspondent witnessed the start of a visit constrained by security anxieties.

As Prince Charles stood on the podium in Colombo airport this afternoon, cannon shots rang out in salute, and a stray dog, clearly convinced that it was about to die, sprinted flat out across the runway. Then the long grass in front of the guns burst into flames and a fire engine raced up to put them out. Finally, the band marched off playing the theme tune from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

It was a promising start to a royal visit which terror and scandal have reduced to a ceremonial skeleton. At a temple east of Colombo which the Prince visited later in the afternoon, one of the treasures he inspected is a statue of the Fasting Buddha, eyes stuck into their sockets, stomach no more than a hole, limbs reduced to fleshless tendons.

The Prince's four-day Sri Lanka tour is a bit like that. Gone is the excursion to the old royal capital of Kandy, the prettiest town in the country and its religious heart. Gone, for reasons of royal face, is the investiture of Arthur C Clarke, the science fiction author about whom claims have been made that he paid for sex with young boys. Various meetings with exponents of intermediate technology and the like were mooted, but security concerns ruled them out.

The Prince's first stop-off was at a new factory making men's underwear for Marks & Spencer, a joint venture between Courtaulds and local firms. He unveiled a plaque. Then at the 17th-century Raja Maha Vajraya temple he was swept up in a traditional temple procession with bare-chested drummers, women in shocking pink dresses waving fly whisks, and infant dancers in pointed hats. Escorted under a mammoth saffron parasol next to the abbot, he was presented a plate of rose petals at the foot of a golden image of the Buddha of the Future inside the temple, and admired the wall paintings.

His arrival in the capital was a muted affair. The schoolchildren who were supposed to cheer and wave had been sent back to their studies lest one of them were to choose glorious martyrdom as a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber. So instead the streets were lined only with soldiers: some 10,000 have been deployed in Colombo over the anniversary period. This is a country which, thanks to the civil war, is celebrating 50 years of freedom through gritted teeth.

There is, however, far less touchiness about the colonial legacy of Sri Lanka than is found in, for example, India. Today, while the might of the country's armed forces rolls past, Prince Charles in the official anniversary celebration, an alternative event in the hills east of Kandy will see the enthronement, at a place called Wellassa, of an anti-British monk as the Prince of Wellassa. Wellassa - Wales, get it?

The National Joint Committee of Buddhist Organisations thinks the Prince should not have

been invited and is staging the tongue-in-cheek event as a mild protest. But feelings amongst the population at large are not running high. Unlike in India, there was no freedom struggle in Sri Lanka: independence was handed them on a plate. Lord Salisbury is honoured as the father of the constitution. Prince Charles's arrival has caused little stir, but that is blamed on his lack of charisma. Were he to have brought his sons, William and Harry, it might have been different. When Diana, Princess of Wales died the grief here rivalled that in Britain.

It is rumoured that Prince Charles may steal time from his thin schedule to make a secret visit to Kandy, to inspect the damage that the Temple of the Sacred Tooth. If he were able to prowl about on his own he would find in Sri Lanka's streets numerous reminders of Britain of the Fifties: Morris Minor and Morris Oxford cars, advertisements for Lifebuoy and Sunlight soaps, Players Gold Leaf and Horlicks. Such a walkabout is very unlikely to happen, however, because as long as the Prince is in the country his safety will be a gigantic headache for the government. The temptation for the Tamil Tigers to punctuate his visit with a "spectacular" must be almost irresistible.

BY PETER POPHAM



Royal chat: Prince Charles talking to children yesterday at the Kelaniya temple outside Colombo. Photograph: Reuters

Falklands talks deadlock

Sixteen years after the Falklands War, there is still no end in sight to the stalemate over the status of the islands. But, as Steve Crawshaw reports, there are hints of optimism in advance of a visit by the Argentine President later this year. Potential oil wealth could both help and hinder progress.

There was a mixture of optimism and dismay at a conference in London yesterday on the future of the Falkland Islands. All sides agreed on the need for dialogue. But there was agreement, too, that finding a way forward was difficult.

Rogelio Pfirter, the Argentine ambassador in London, said that his government was "fully committed to building bridges with the islands", but also admitted that a solution is "some way down the road".

The potential for economic development has transformed the outlook for the Falklands. Sheep-farming is no longer the only game in town. Oil prospects are still unclear - around a 30 per cent chance, according to one speaker yesterday. But John d'Ancona, a consultant with knowledge of the region, suggested that oil production of 100,000 barrels per day was not unrealistic. This, he speculated, could bring in income of £500,000 a day - thus transforming the islands' economy at a stroke. The possibility of diamonds deposits has also been raised.

Fishing is much more important than it was 20 years ago - and continues to be a source of both friction and co-operation. The co-operation has become necessary in order to ensure that stocks do not decline. But it is difficult to work out how to divide the fishing. Fish, as one speaker noted with some understatement, "do not observe man-made boundaries".

Argentina wants to put shared sovereignty on the table. Britain has so far been cautious. The islanders fear a sell-out. Sukey Cameron, representative in London of the Falkland Islands government, told yesterday's conference, organised by the South Atlantic Council, that the views of the islanders are regarded as "at best inconvenient, at worst unimportant".

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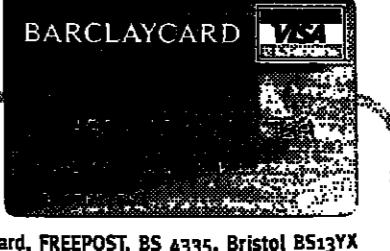
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Blair heads for US and a sexually challenged mission

A battle between sex and substance will be fought out between the media, President Bill Clinton and Tony Blair when the Prime Minister flies out to Washington this evening. Anthony Bevins, Political Editor, reports on the build-up to the three-day visit.

While the President and Mr Blair will attempt to concentrate on the big picture issues of Iraq, Northern Ireland, the Asia "meltdown", work and welfare, education and health, the Monica Lewinsky question will be lurking - and is bound to be put when the two men stage a joint press conference at the White House on Friday.

At one London briefing on the visit this week, the question was even raised by the *Financial Times*, and in an exchange with a BBC correspondent yesterday, the Prime Minister's official spokesman said: "I fear the BBC has decided that Lewinsky is the story, but we will have to live with that."

LEWINSKY'S THREE DOZEN WHITE HOUSE VISITS

The hue and cry over President Bill Clinton's alleged relationship with the White House trainee, Monica Lewinsky, had subsided sufficiently yesterday for Ms Lewinsky and her lawyer, William Ginsburg, finally to leave Washington for California. But new evidence about the extent of contacts between the President and the trainee he had referred to as "that woman" in his televised denial last week indicated that his difficulties were far from over.

In a front-page report, the *New York Times* said that Ms Lewinsky

resolutions on inspection. "This is not a situation," he said, "in which the UN inspectors have been there trying to find evidence of evil intent on the part of Saddam Hussein. The evidence is there."

"They have uncovered masses and masses of weapons: 48 Scud missiles; 38,000 chemical weapons munitions; 3,000 tonnes of chemical weapon precursors; a large biological weapons manufacturing plant."

"These are actual things that they have uncovered and stopped, which is the reason why we are so intent on bringing him back into line and allowing the inspectors back in to do their work in the future, because obviously our concern is that if we don't do that, then he may be developing further weapons of mass destruction."

Against that background, one of the issues raised at yesterday's Number 10 briefing was whether Cherie Booth would be taking a hairdresser with her. The Prime Minister's official spokesman said: "I honestly am not aware of her follicular arrangements."

Quoting White House logs which its reporters had been told of, but had not seen, the *New York Times* said Ms Lewinsky was cleared for entry - no easy feat - on 37 occasions between April 1996 and December 1997. The last recorded time was on 28 De-

ember. Mosdy, clearance had been given by Mr Clinton's personal secretary, Betty Currie.

Ms Currie's desk is just outside the Oval office, and she acted effectively as gatekeeper, granting or denying access and screening telephone calls. Ms Currie was called to testify last week in the investigation into the Lewinsky case being conducted by the independent prosecutor, Kenneth Starr, but volunteered no information about what she said.

— Mary Dejevsky, Washington



Supporters in Washington commemorate those who died of Aids. The three-drug cocktail has brought hope. Photograph: Costa Manos/Magnum

New threat mars fall in American Aids deaths

Deaths from Aids across the US fell 44 per cent in the first half of last year, showing the power of new drug cocktails. But Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor, says evidence about the origins of the epidemic suggest the virus could pose a new threat.

"We can't see the end of the epidemic but it is the beginning of a new era," Dr Kevin DeCock told the world's largest annual Aids conference in Chicago yesterday.

His optimism is understandable. Dr DeCock of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta was commenting on new figures which show that Aids is being successfully curbed with the three-drug combinations introduced two years ago. A diagnosis that was a death sentence has become a chronic condition compatible with a near normal life.

Figures presented at the fifth conference on retroviruses and opportunistic infections show that US deaths from Aids peaked in 1994 and 1995 and then nosed downwards in 1996. Last year the fall accelerated.

In the first half of 1997, 12,040 Americans died of Aids compared with 21,460 in the first half of 1996. Figures for the whole of 1997, only available for New York where 16 per cent of the country's Aids patients live, show an even bigger decline at 48 per cent. Both men and women and people of all races are benefiting.

The three-drug cocktails - two older Aids drugs such as AZT plus one of the newer protease inhibitors - have revolutionised Aids care. Typically, people start on them as soon as they learn they are infected, before they get ill. The treatment drives the level of virus in the blood so low that

it is undetectable and many patients remain well. It does not work for all, however, and patients have to take around 20 pills a day at precise times.

Some specialists fear that the decline may only be a lull and that deaths will rise again as the effect of the new treatments wears off. Dr Harold Jaffe of the Centers for Disease Control said: "Are we in a hibernation period? Is there something bad on the horizon?"

The total number of Americans living with Aids is up 13 per cent to 259,000. Between 400,000 and 650,000 are estimated to be infected with HIV.

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If it's courtroom drama you're after, don't go to court



'Justice,' goes the ruling, 'should not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done.' And if you really want to see it done well, says Paul Taylor, go to a theatre.

The pink flower she wore when she went into the witness box wasn't a smart move. Nor was the restrainedly stylish navy blue suit. I mean, a woman like her should have been afire with scarlet at the very least. And when this 38-year-old songwriter, who had conducted an affair with a 17-year-old bit-of-rough toy boy, was acquitted of murdering her husband by malice to the skull, her neighbours - pruriently agog at the trial like the rest of the nation - took their revenge by tearing out all the pink flowers from her garden. Pink had been her favourite colour. So it was only appropriate that, when the thought of her lover hanging and the public outrage and the press-bounding after her release drove this woman to suicide, a friend should have sent a pink wreath to the funeral.

It may seem a far cry from the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus to the case of Alma Rattenbury of the Villa Madeira, Bournemouth, the real-life subject of Terence Rattigan's last play, *Cause Célebre*, which is just about to be revived by Neil Bartlett at the Lyric Hammersmith. You can, however, trace a direct connection and not just because both works illustrate the inherent theatricality of trials.

There, at the origins of Western drama and then again in a play about a 1930s court case, written in the mid-1970s, you find

the same thing: in society's eyes, the deepest crime is being a woman.

The contemporary mind may wince a little at the gender-coding of the forces doing battle in Aeschylus' great trilogy - the matrifocal law of blood versus emergent all-male democracy and civic order, to say nothing of the casuistic, scarcely women-friendly ruling that matricide is acceptable because it is fathers who create children. It is true that some outstanding modern productions have incorporated a sense of their own unease with these. In Peter Stein's *Oresteia*, for example, the culminating trial was presented in an irreverent manner not unreminiscent of a glitzy TV game show, and when the avenging grey-hag Furies were gagged and trussed up in purple cloths, the resulting image was pointedly ambiguous. Were they now unmimified or were these chrysalises from which new life would fight its way out?

But before we congratulate ourselves too strenuously on our own progressiveness, consider the Lyric's canny publicity blurb for this new staging of *Cause Célebre*: 'Alma Rattenbury was 38 years old. Her husband was 68. Her lover was 17. No wonder she ended up at the Old Bailey.' The tone is a camp dare: come on, it says, just how unprejudiced and unshockable are you, really?

The first words of the play are from the Clerk of the Court: 'Alma Victoria Rattenbury, you are charged with the murder of Francis Mawson Rattenbury on March 28, 1935. Are you guilty or not guilty?' Murder, though, is a side issue: what is fundamentally on trial here is female sexuality. She may have been innocent of the killing but it was for being, in their eyes, an evil moral influence that the press and the crowds hounded her. Never mind that she had initially confessed to the murder to save Wood, her lover, thus evincing rather more than mere carnal appetite for him. Never mind that it was to protect her own young sons that she changed her plea. Also forget that no one thought it odd for the deceased man to have married a woman 30 years his junior.

No, it suited the media and the Tory MP for Bournemouth to present Wood as a preyed-up working-class innocent, one of our boys. Rattigan's play does not stir the problem of Alma Rattenbury's larger responsibility and responsibilities, but it complicates our understanding of them by counterpointing her affair with the relationship between a sexually repressed lady juror and the (also 17-year-old) public school son she passionately loves to the point of driving him to a prostate and the clap clinic.

There are two extremes to which trials on stage and in films can be pushed. One is the phantasmagoric end where everything seems to be taking place in the skull of the accused, dramatising the inflamed subjective nightmare of being found out or of having to account for oneself to an inscrutable court. John Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence* is an outstanding example of this with its wrecked, womanising, self-iac-



pass at a policeman in a room spattered with the blood of her dead husband), the play is formally daring and very acute about double standards. Bartlett points out that it's full of scenes of dressing and undressing - a juxtaposed pair of sequences, for example, shows how "there's much more image manipulation" on the part of the two male lawyers robing and talking about rouging over the facial effects of a *late night* than there is in Alma's ponderings with her female guard about how to dress for the trial.

Indeed, you sometimes feel there should be a rule of blanket nudity in courts, but that is "unusually frank by the standards of any period" and that blasts apart the conventional courtroom format. As Irving Wardle wrote in his *Times* review of the 1977 West End premiere: "The play offers a perfectly coherent picture, smashed to fragments and regrouped into a mosaic for the sake of maximum suspense and maximum revelation of character." With jump-cuts, split-screen effects and multiple flashbacks (to, say, a drunken Alma dancing to a record of one of her own songs and making a

particular pleasure, they afford many alternative ones in a piece that is "unusually frank by the standards of any period" and that blasts apart the conventional courtroom format.

When the National revived that play five years ago, much was made of the fact that the production had a female director, Di Trevis. A woman directing John Osborne seemed to strike some as a startling incongruity. Rather like hearing that an unrepentant Nazi was putting on a revival of *The Sound of Music*. Admirably, Trevis refrained from giving the proceedings an unduly feminist slant, though at the end she did allow herself the unnervingly effective stroke of showing all the play's women now ganged up in the jury box.

The

opposite extreme - of

which the Tricycle's Nicolas Kent, with his productions of *The Nuremberg Trials* and *Srebrenica*, focusing on the 1996 Hague War Crimes Tribunal, has of late proved himself a master - is to stage a straight edited transcript of an actual trial. The tremendous power of *Srebrenica*, which eventually transferred to the Olivier, stemmed from the tension in it between the humdrum and the horrific. Appalling atrocities (the busing of 5,000 Muslims out of a UN enclave to be slaughtered by the awaiting Bosnian Serb soldiers) coolly came to light in a studiedly low-key, realistic re-creation of a courtroom where people paused to consult facts and notebooks or to check that a set of headphones was working.

It

was a reminder that the proceedings of a real court can be positively anti-dramatic: the drama was in the wholly unsensational revelation of the unspeakable. And there was, of course, the compression of the editing. By contrast, as Thomas Sutcliffe remarked in this newspaper during the Louise Woodward trial, for all the reporters' resort to theatre-derived vocabulary ("little actress", the inevitable "Greek tragedy"), there were actually very few "dramatic" moments in the protracted televised proceedings. The minutiae of the scientific evidence numbed the mind.

Cause Célebre

offers in part

- the whole adds up to so much

more - the good old satisfactions

of a third kind of courtroom play, the kind where the trial is a heightened metaphor for the theatrical experience in general, ie prurient observation. As Neil Bartlett says, "We go to the theatre to see and hear people do and say things that nice normal people like ourselves don't do and say." Now what does that remind one of? Bartlett has been on several research trips to the Old Bailey and is struck by it as the "kind of club of people who take their flasks and their sandwiches and go to all the trials and discuss previous cases. They are a bit like the people who always used to queue for the slip seats at Covent Garden."

Bartlett

stresses

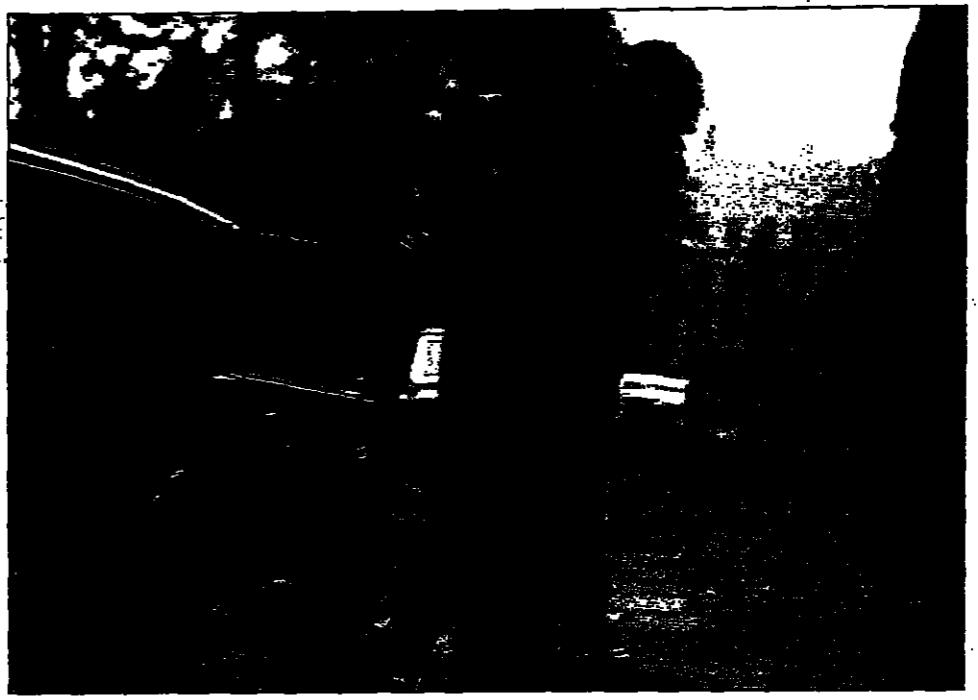
the

uneasy

complexity you're bound to feel.

One mistake Alma made was not to give the public what they wanted. She never broke down - "and, of course," the director adds, "at some level, the reason you come to see *Cause Célebre* is because you think that, at certain points, you are going to see the leading actress crack". If Rattigan's play and Alma deny an audience that

'Cause Célebre' previews from tomorrow, opens Tuesday, Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, King Street, London W6 (0181-741 2311)



A verdict on gender: Alma Rattenbury escorted to the Old Bailey, and top, the crowd outside. Below: Amanda Harris and Laurence Mitchell in the new production of the play telling their tale

Photographs: Hulton/Sharon Kean Associates



THE INDEPENDENT The 'Bobble Problem' Remover

- only £5.95 inc. p&p

Even the best quality knitwear, including jumpers, cardigans, skirts, woollen jackets and coats are prone to producing bobbles due to washing, dry-cleaning and general wear.

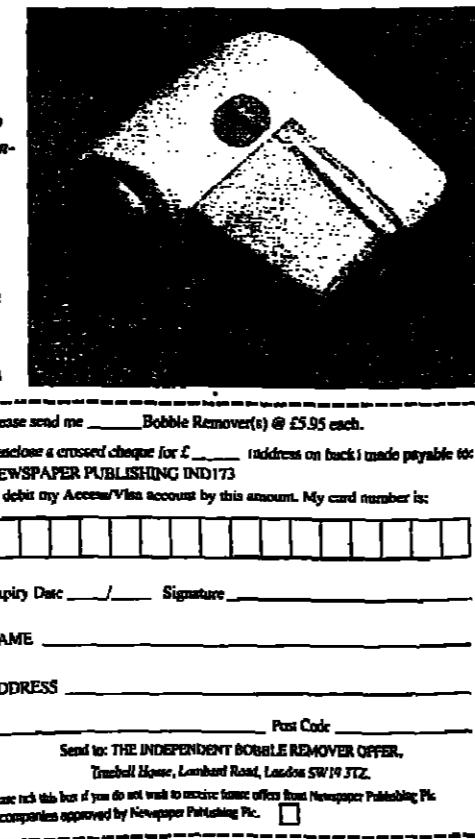
A few seconds use of this lint remover is a simple, effective and inexpensive answer to the frustrating 'bobble problem'.

Operating on just two AA batteries (not supplied), the lint removers' safe, fast action stainless steel blades quickly remove unwanted and unsightly bobbles and fluff to give your garments a new lease of life. You can even use it on upholstery.

It requires no servicing, apart from an occasional emptying and comes with a full 12 month guarantee.

How to order:
Phone 0181 540 9696 for the credit card order service

Or fill in the coupon quoting your ACCESS/VISA number, or send with crossed cheque/postal orders, no cash please, to:
The Independent Bobble Remover Offer,
Truefitt House, Lombard Road, London SW19 3TZ.
This offer is subject to availability and UK mainland readers only. Please allow up to 28 days for delivery. If not completely satisfied return within 7 days for a full refund.



Please send me Bobble Remover(s) @ £5.95 each.
I enclose a crossed cheque for made payable to
NEWSPAPER PUBLISHING IND/173
or debit my Access/Visa account by this amount. My card number is:

Expiry Date Signature
NAME
ADDRESS
Post Code
Send to: THE INDEPENDENT BOBBLE REMOVER OFFER,
Truefitt House, Lombard Road, London SW19 3TZ.
Please tick this box if you do not wish to receive future offers from Newspaper Publishing Plc
or companies approved by Newspaper Publishing Plc.

From one-off to rip-off: a short step from the catwalk



Julian McDonald look Black dress with fuchsia pink underslip, £50, from House, 19-21 Argyll Street, London W1, 96 Kings Road, London SW3, and branches nationwide, enquires 071-278 3491.



Matthew Williamson look Long black feather dress, £69.99, from Oasis, 292 Regent Street, London W1, and branches nationwide, enquires 0865-881 986. Stylist: Holly Davies; Hair and Make-up: Helen Bannon at Mandy Coakley; Model: Nicola Moorhouse at Models One



Chloe look Grey jacket, £280 (part of suit) by Principles, The Plaza, Oxford Street, London W1, and branches nationwide, enquires 071-291 2332; cream embroidered top, £24.99, from New Look, Oxford Street, London W1 and branches nationwide



Calvin Klein look Gold short-sleeved polo neck, £60, black satin pedal pushers, £60, from French Connection, 249 Regent Street, London W1 and branches nationwide, enquires 071-399 7200.



Julian McDonald look Black dress with fuchsia pink underslip, £50, from House, 19-21 Argyll Street, London W1, 96 Kings Road, London SW3, and branches nationwide, enquires 071-278 3491.

Why spend £1,000 on a Stella McCartney original when you can stick to a tenth of the price on the high street? Tamsin Inch follows the journey from two chainstores, asks top designers how they cope, and gives tips on how to mix high fashion with good value wearables. Photographs by Sheridan Morley.

The fashion industry is one long chain reaction, from designer suits in ivy tower ateliers to clothes that make little concession to the wearer. Clothes appear on the catwalk by superhuman woman. Six months later, clothes go on sale at designer boutiques and department stores at uncommodified prices.

Theory does not end there, though. Mewes along the line, high-street retailers follow in the action. Ideas are

plucked from the catwalk and reworked for mass production. Such is the speed and sophistication of our high-street chain stores that often their version of a designer dress will appear on the rails before the original. This sequence of events is a fact of life. The designer can but feel flattered that their work is worthy of mass consumption. The consumer applauds and races out at the beginning of each season to shop at whatever level fits her wage packet. She has the choice: Stella McCartney for Chloé suit and lace top for £1,000 plus, or a similar look – without the precision tailoring and the antique lace – from Principles for less than £150.

Take Matthew Williamson. Last September, young Mr Williamson was feted as the new, shining star of British fashion. His collection of 11 outfits was not scary, shocking or hideously unwearable. One dress in particular was singled out by the fashion press, a fuchsia-pink shift with a black chiffon overdress embroidered with

a single peacock feather. And, not surprisingly, that same dress has also caught the imaginations of design teams working for high-street retailers.

"For me, it's not really a problem at the moment," says Williamson. The original dress is so expensive and exclusive – £480, and available at only a handful of chi-chi outlets – because it takes each one three days to be hand-embroidered. Each tip of the feather is beaded by hand with a needle and thread. The difference between the painstakingly made genuine article and the mass-manufactured, printed dress is like the difference between an original Picasso and an Athena print. "What I am doing cannot be reproduced on the high street. The mass-produced version can but nod to the original idea. It is not a true copy. It's weird, though, when you see the high-street version in the shops before your own designs are on the rail."

There are ways for designers to protect their own ideas, but the process is lengthy and fraught, not to mention expensive and

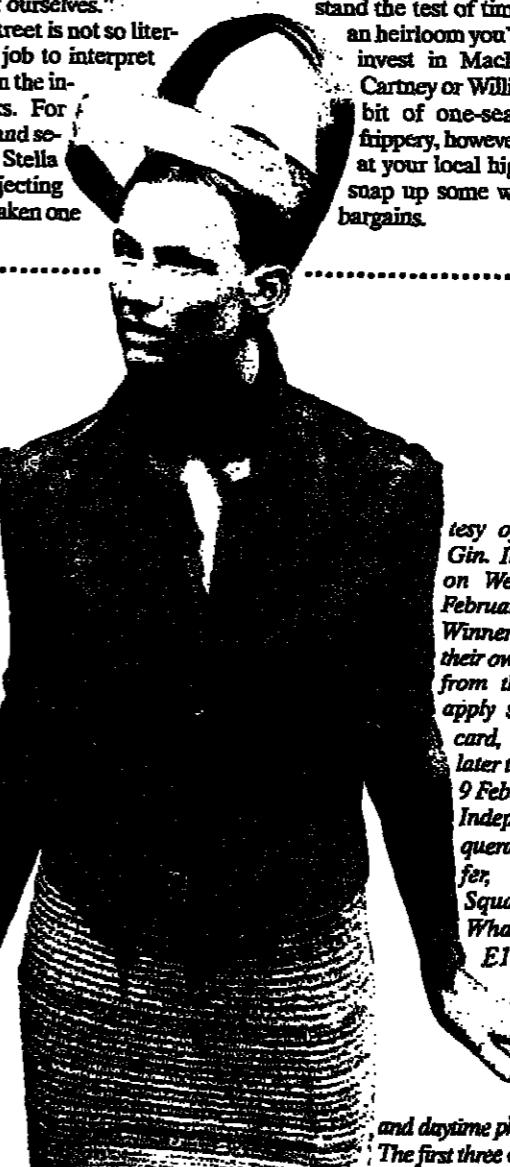
time-consuming. Most designers take imitation as the sincerest form of flattery, simply because they have no choice in the matter. Designer Clements Ribeiro has had to stand by and watch their luxury cashmere, multi-coloured, stripy cardigans and sweaters filter down into the mass market. Their story is different, however. The relationship between high street and high fashion can work two ways. While Matthew Williamson has no desire to offer his services as a designer for a high-street retailer, despite the fact that he has had offers, Clements Ribeiro signed a contract with Dorothy Perkins four seasons ago. Instead of simply watering down ideas from their collections for the Dorothy Perkins customer, Suzanne Clements and Inacio Ribeiro design a capsule collection tailor-made for the high-street customer.

Designers have to be careful not to alienate their own customers, who will happily spend £600 on a dress, by apparently offering designs from their main collections at a tenth of the price. "It's for a completely

different person, a different customer," says Suzanne Clements. "Working for the high street, things have to be much more practical. For instance, a designer range can have the most fragile chiffon dress, but for the high street, clothes have to pass a rip test." The designers are now fairly well adjusted to the cheaper copies they see whenever they venture onto Oxford Street round the corner from their studio. "When we first started out, I was completely outraged," says Clements, who bought all the rip-offs she could find and took them to their solicitor. "Once I figured out it was not worth the battle – who wins against these giants? – I stopped letting it be an issue. Now we're being paid to rip off ourselves."

Often, the high street is not so literal. It is after all, its job to interpret trends and looks from the international catwalks. For the mix of romance and serious tailoring that Stella McCartney is re-injecting into Chloé, we have taken one

grey suit from Principles and teamed it with a lace little camisole top. For the modern minimalist look, as perfected by designers such as Calvin Klein, Richard Tyler and Marc Jacobs, we have picked out a pair of satin pedal-pushers and a short-sleeved polo-neck. Drawstrings are another major trend for spring/summer; they cropped up on the catwalks of Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, Nicole Farhi and MaxMara, as well as in the collection by Clements Ribeiro for Dorothy Perkins. While Julian McDonald has made an art form of textural knits and painterly dévôrè, Warehouse has hinted at the look with a black jersey dévôrè dress layered over a fuchsia-pink slip. It won't stand the test of time, and if it is an heirloom you're after, then invest in MacDonald, McCartney or Williamson. For a bit of one-season fashion frappery, however, take a look at your local high street and snap up some well-informed bargains.



COUNTDOWN TO LONDON FASHION WEEK

Who said fashion was just about clothes?

May three weeks ago, the tantrums, the bashes for models, and catwalk contests are fun. Melanie Rickey is back on the runway to see what's new. London Fashion week is in action with the eyes of the (orderly) upon

so off. London fashion is now. London is the ace pe for fashion happening's fashion is so popular in New York's premier department store, Saks Fifth Avenue dedicating a whole floor to it, promoting it in early spring. They are calling it

the British Invasion Part II, in reference to the first one back in the Sixties when Carnaby Street was swinging.

Competition between the young designers for a place on the schedule is particularly tough this season. Julian Webber was lucky this time. He has been given a slot by the British Fashion Council for an official catwalk show. However, Anthony Symonds, former Graduate of the Year and Krizia designer, and Andrew 'the Fly' Groves were not. Groves's nickname is thanks to the finale of his debut show which featured the model Georgina Cooper removing a tailored jacket made of cotton wadding. He acts as though fame is as sure as his next breath, and for his show Groves is guaranteed to unleash specially bred flies. Ms Cooper was sick as soon as she came off the runway. "I don't understand why I'm not on the schedule," he says. "I

have two books full of press clippings from my first show." That is true, but Groves (formerly known as Jimmy Jumble) gained no stockists. Just one shop, Covent Garden's Koh Samui, offers his clothes on a made-to-order basis.

The trouble with Groves is that he is into hype beyond anything else, much like his old friend Alexander McQueen was at the beginning of his career in 1992. Groves must be doing something right, though. He has already signed up with a big Japanese buyer, and sold the worldwide rights to his name; all this before his clothes and image are famous. He acts as though fame is as sure as his next breath, and for his show Groves is guaranteed to gather an audience, despite the fact he will be clashing with an "official" catwalk show. He

has hired Judy Blame as his stylist, but more importantly he has Simon Costin, McQueen's former art director, designing and staging his show. He promises no flies, but goes on to say "it will be better than that". Expect sick-bags to be on the seats, and those with front-row tickets fighting to sit on the back row. Who said fashion shows were about clothes?

Maybe that is why Julian

Webber is faring better on the fashion stakes. Liberty bought red leather jackets, and orchid printed chiffons. It even part-financed the production costs. Koh Samui has bought a selection of his finely sculpted leather pieces.

Webber believes in his clothes, and is uncomfortable with hype. The only concession to the hype machine he has made this season is to his

sponsors Tanqueray Gin, for which he has posed cheesily, with the cocktail he designed, the 'Webber UV Ice'. "I wanted it to smell a certain way, and have an eerie white/lilac glow to it," he says. That is in keeping with the theme for his collection. The cocktail contains Tanqueray, lime juice, sugar, Blue Bells and cranberry, and joins the McQueen Sling, the (Sam) McKnight Fever, and the Bikini (for Agent Provocateur).

Webber, who is still fresh from six years at St Martin's, knows that being on the schedule is the endorsement he needs, but also feels the pressure of expectation. He wishes he had the facilities of a couture house to execute his designs, but is making do with a fourth-floor studio in an old East End brewery, and his

right-hand woman and stylist Corinne Sifflet Seymour. He is also a thinker. Indeed, he says: "What I do is based on a state of mind. I need to communicate my essential vision and if people understand that, fine. If they don't, that's fine too."

His show is sure to attract all the movers and shakers keeping an eye out for the next big thing, as will Groves's, but this season it will be the clothes under scrutiny. A show is just a show, after all. It's fun, but it's the clothes that have to sell, and if they don't, what's the point?

For anyone who has ever wanted to attend a London fashion show, we have three pairs of VIP tickets to give away for Julian Webber's show, cour-

tesy of Tanqueray Gin. It takes place on Wednesday 25 February at 3.45pm. Winners must make their own way to and from the show. To apply, send a postcard, to arrive no later than Monday

9 February, to The Independent, Tanqueray/Webber, 1 Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London E14, stating name, address

and daytime phone number. The first three out of the bag will win. Photograph by Ben Elwes



Young at heart: Age Concern's poster featuring 56-year-old Pearl Read, challenging perceptions of older women in the workplace

Go on, show us your bra

A glimpse of something shocking has long ceased to be, well, shocking. Now it's age that catches our eye. **Kathy Marks** on the latest users of underwear as outerwear.

It is an arresting image. A 56-year-old woman in a plunging brassiere gazes down from a billboard, in a pose reminiscent of Eva Herzigova in the infamous Wonderbra advertisements.

This time the message is political, not sexual. The charity Age Concern is making a point about our perceptions of older women as part of its campaign against age discrimination at work. The slogan on the poster reads: "The first thing some people notice is her age."

It is, nonetheless, an unsettling sight. *True, this is an exceptionally attractive and well-preserved 56-year-old who could easily shave a decade off her age. But she patently lacks the bloom of youth of the stereotypical lingerie model, and thus subverts the Herzigova ad – which is what Age Concern intended.*

There is an intriguing subtext to this poster beyond its call for equality. Its shock value lies in the fact that it features an older model, not that it shows a woman in a revealing brassiere. So ubiquitous are such portraits now that we barely raise an eyebrow. Fashion advertising and evolving social attitudes have combined to anaesthetise us to images that were once confined to the bedroom.

Style may be ephemeral, but it reflects more profound cultural changes. So when Madonna appeared in an exaggeratedly pointy bra designed by John Paul Gaultier in the early 1990s, it was not just a fashion joke; it caught the imagination. The bra, after all, is a sexy and beautiful garment

which clothes the sexiest and most beautiful part of the female body. The Gaultier bra, together with similar confections by Vivienne Westwood, coincided with the relaunch of the Wonderbra, embraced by legions of admirers for its push-up and cleavage-enhancing properties. Soon women were turning up at nightclubs and art exhibitions wearing little more above their waists than a frothy black bra.

The "underwear as outerwear" trend appears to be here to stay.

Dawn French, the generously endowed comedienne, turned up on *TFI Friday* last week wearing a big white bra over her T-shirt, and invited members of the audience to remove it with one hand.

Marcelle D'Argy Smith, editor of *Woman's Journal* magazine, says: "Women want to show off their bodies in a way that they never did in the past. It is no longer shocking to see a woman wearing a skimpy bra with a transparent blouse on top; it is not even deemed inappropriate at work. And it's not necessarily a come-hither thing: it is very pretty and feminine."

Tongue at least partly in cheek, she adds: "We really do have the best of both worlds now. We can wear what we want, and if a man comes too close, we can throw the sexual harassment rulebook in his face."

It was all very different in 1914, when Mary Phelps Jacobs, an American socialite, decided that she was fed up with her uncomfortable corset and, with the help of her French maid, tied two handkerchiefs together with pink ribbon. Thus was the early brassiere born. But it was not until 1925 that it was designed with individual cups and adjustable straps, and only in 1938 were variations in cup size introduced.

Manufacturers and advertisers realised long ago that the bra is much more than just a functional scrap of lace and cot-

ton. It is, in fact, a garment that is central to women's self-image at every life stage. In adolescence, girls are desperate to get into their first bras in order to prove their feminine credentials. Early boyfriends are irrevocably associated with fumbling to get them undone. The start of a more mature affair necessitates the purchase of something new and erotic. Pregnancy signals the start of

a bewildering succession of ever more voluminous versions. Breast-feeding means those clever ones with unhookable cups for easy access.

Dr Martin Skinner, a social psychologist at the University of Warwick, says: "The history of art and fashion reflect the changing ways in which women's breasts have been covered, revealed and accentuated through the ages. By definition, the bra is an icon of femininity. That's why bra-burning by early feminists was such a potent symbol; the bra was seen as an object of restraint and repression. Now I suppose you could say that women have given in to constraint in the name of freedom."

If modern feminists can wear lipstick without being accused of treachery to the cause, as the writer Natasha Walter asserted in a recent book, *The New Feminism*, then they can, too, wear provocative bras with no qualms. And they do wear them, if the success of lingerie stores such as Agent Provocateur is anything to go by. Even Marks & Spencer, which once had an extremely straitlaced range, has introduced whole racks of skimpy and slinky numbers.

British women, once lambasted for their reluctance to splash out on underwear, particularly compared with their Continental counterparts, are spending twice as much on it now as a decade ago. The bra business alone is worth £500m a year. "More and more women are prepared to spend that bit extra," says Jill Kenton, manager of Rigby and Peller, corsetiers to the Queen, whose made-to-measure bras cost up to £400.

Breast sizes, too, have grown larger over the years, thanks to healthier lifestyles, better nutrition and the contraceptive Pill. In the past 10 years, the average bust has advanced from a 34B to a 36C. Manufacturers have responded with larger-cup ranges. The

success of Sophie Dahl, the voluptuously-proportioned supermodel, suggests that fashion may be turning away from women with ironing-board figures.

And towards older women?

The other interesting point about the Age Concern poster is that it suggests that the nubile young girls who rule the roost in fashion and advertising may not, after all, have a monopoly on allure, that postmenopausal, wrinkled women are equally legitimate sexual beings.

This was the signal that artist Melanie Manchot sought to send when she plastered huge posters of her 66-year-old mother, dressed in her underwear, on hoardings outside a busy Underground station in London last month. Sexualisation of the older woman may be starting to catch on. The charms of veteran actresses such as Helen Mirren, 51, are regularly lauded. *Dazed and Confused*, the men's magazine, published close-up shots of women in their sixties, seventies and eighties, clad only in their underwear, in its issue last month.

The increasingly explicit, unashamedly sexy advertisements of recent years have given the bra a great deal of exposure and helped it emerge from beneath layers of outer clothes. In some ways, this is a welcome development. Perhaps a garment that defines women's shape more than any other – and is also a powerful symbol of femininity, evoking both motherhood and sexual attraction – should not be coyly concealed.

And if Pearl Read, the Age Concern model, has managed to push the boundaries that little bit further, she may be just the right woman for the job. Ten years ago she brought a ball in Berkeley Square to a standstill when she suddenly unfastened her halter-neck top and gave her astounded fellow guests an unfeathered view of her breasts.

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The increasingly explicit, unashamedly sexy advertisements of recent years have given the bra a great deal of exposure and helped it emerge from beneath layers of outer clothes. In some ways, this is a welcome development. Perhaps a garment that defines women's shape more than any other – and is also a powerful symbol of femininity, evoking both motherhood and sexual attraction – should not be coyly concealed.

And if Pearl Read, the Age Concern model, has managed to push the boundaries that little bit further, she may be just the right woman for the job. Ten years ago she brought a ball in Berkeley Square to a standstill when she suddenly unfastened her halter-neck top and gave her astounded fellow guests an unfeathered view of her breasts.

Breast sizes, too, have grown larger over the years, thanks to healthier lifestyles, better nutrition and the contraceptive Pill. In the past 10 years, the average bust has advanced from a 34B to a 36C. Manufacturers have responded with larger-cup ranges. The

success of Sophie Dahl, the voluptuously-proportioned supermodel, suggests that fashion may be turning away from women with ironing-board figures.

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The Right Rev Lesslie Newbigin

James Edward Lesslie Newbigin, missionary and minister of the church born Newcastle upon Tyne 8 December 1909; ordained 1935; Bishop in Madura and Rammam, Church of South India 1947-59; Bishop in Madras 1965-74; CBE 1974; Lecturer in Theology, Selby Oak Colleges, Birmingham 1974-79; minister, United Reformed Church, Winsor Green 1980-88; married 1936 Helen Henderson (one son, three daughters); died London 30 January 1998.

Some years ago a prominent Roman Catholic theologian, who first knew Lesslie Newbigin at Vatican II, referred to this prominent Presbyterian as his father in God and spoke warmly of his missionary work, missionary thinking and varied publications. In response to a protestant surprise he said "Who else is there?"

Born in Northumbria to an English Presbyterian family, James Edward Lesslie Newbigin studied in a southern Quaker school, Leighton Park, before going to Cambridge. Studying economics under J.M. Keynes in preparation for work in his father's shipping business, he slowly left behind youthful doubts and then suddenly decided to prepare for ministerial ordination.

Partly to pay for the required theological training he worked for some time with the missionary minded Student Christian Movement where he met Helen Henderson whom he later married and with whom he lived happily ever after. In 1933 he returned to Cambridge for theology where he pursued his own line of thinking rather than prescribed courses. In 1936, he and Helen sailed for India as Church of Scotland missionaries, most of the journey being spent on finishing his first book, *Christian Freedom in the Modern World* (1937).

Appointed to the Madras area, he quickly demonstrated his phenomenal gift of excellence in whatever he attempted. He was linguist, administrator, ecclesiastic, theologian, missiologist, preacher, pastor, epistemologist, author, limerick

writer, rock climber and doughty fighter, but all his talents were used in the service of his missionary evangelistic vocation. He was a village evangelist who did it the hard way. So hard that a bus accident and then more than ten operations brought him back to England for a time.

Returning to India he was one of the architects of the Church of South India and became one of its first bishops when he was appointed in 1947 to Madura and Rammam. This "presbyterian" bishop produced a new understanding of episcopacy and many influential books such as *Southern India Diary* (1951), *The Reunion of the Church* (1948), *The Household of God* (1953) and *Sin and Salvation* (1956) - translated from the original Tamil.

In 1959, he was persuaded to become general secretary of the International Missionary Council.

He cried ceaselessly for a missionary encounter with our brilliant but pagan western culture. Indians with all their problems could hear the gospel and had hope; England seemed deaf to the gospel and short on hope. Europeans were good missionaries everywhere else but Europe. Post-Enlightenment culture was so hostile to the gospel that unless it was redeemed, the Church was in hazard.

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Like William Temple, Newbigin wrote a wonderful commentary on the Gospel of John, *The Light Has Come* (1982), and was deeply involved in social and political issues. The chapter in his autobiography *Unfinished Agenda* (1985) on the Madras years is headed "Madras: Mission in Metropolis"; later, dissatisfied with the theology of the Anglican *Faith in the City*, he wrote the theological chapter in *Faith in the City of Birmingham* (1988). His last 20 years were devoted to

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What Clinton can tell Blair about Murdoch, the titanic tax avoider



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Tony Blair flies off today to consort with the President of the United States. A love feast is prepared. The two men have a lot in common, starting with wives of considerable distinction. They share something else. In both their countries a large chunk of media power is exercised by the same corporate conglomerate controlled by a single man, Rupert Murdoch. His sway in American politics is a good deal less than the influence he enjoys in this country. Not even the most imaginative paranoid can trace a pattern in the products of the Murdoch-owned Fox television and 20th Century Fox film, *Bart Simpson and Independence Day* included. But then again not even the biggest sceptic could deny Murdoch's role in bankrolling the American right; if there is, as Mrs Clinton so memorably affirmed, a right-wing conspiracy out to do her husband down, rest assured Rupert Murdoch's fingers are somewhere in the pie.

As for Britain, Murdoch is a man to

whom a Labour prime minister opens the doors of Downing Street, the potentate to whom, mysteriously, party policies on concentrations of power and competition are not to be applied. So will Messrs Blair and Clinton confer on how they perceive the power of Citizen Murdoch? Bill Clinton ought to tell him what the United States Department of the Treasury has been up to, and as a result Tony Blair might, just might, return to Britain with a grain or two more calcium in his backbone, prepared to look again at his pusillanimous and profoundly mistaken approach to the power of Murdoch.

Led by the Internal Revenue Service of the United States, tax officials from several countries recently got together to swap notes on the global reach of News Corp, the Australian-based entity Murdoch uses to rule his empire. They confront a striking question. Why does News Corp pay an effective corporation tax rate of just under 8 per cent while comparable media

entities, such as Disney, pay nearly four times as much?

Let's be clear that the problem with Murdoch is not his success or his reach. News International - the British arm of the empire - is quick to allege that rivals are merely jealous, that they are anti-enterprise. Wrong. Murdoch's acumen as a businessman has been as a manipulator of the state. He is a connoisseur of regulatory regimes. He uses his property to do his politics. The News Corp story is a tale of tax havens, write-offs, accounting rules and clever balance sheet manipulation across different jurisdictions. It reports results in Australia which, if presented under US rules, would look dramatically different. Globalisation, in Murdoch terms, is the science of outsmarting national tax authorities. The man admitted to Blair's boudoir is a titanic tax avoider.

The thing to register is that the Murdoch empire is built on lack of transparency. This must be borne in mind when

he pleads innocent to charges that he is a predator in British media markets, siphoning off money here to subsidise aggression there. Exactly what are internal relationships between News International and the (part-owned) BSkyB, let alone his other telecoms and transport interests? The answer is that there are very few people inside the loop who know, let alone external competition regulators. Is Murdoch using funds from broadcasting to supply his newspaper operations in order to afford sustained price-cutting? The impact of those price cuts on the market is palpable. We at *The Independent* feel cuts in the cover price of *The Times*, and it hurts.

But the argument goes much wider than the fate of one newspaper and the resulting minimisation of pluralism in the market for news and opinion. It has two legs. One is about the effectiveness of competition rules and the regulatory bodies meant to enforce them. The Blair government's Competition Bill fails to give

the United Kingdom rules on predatory pricing anywhere near as tough as those in the United States or even Australia. If it passes in its present form, however keen Derek Morris, the chairman in waiting of the new Competition Commission, might be to investigate, his hands will be tied. With his lobbying might Murdoch seems likely to escape invigilation.

But there is a second reason why the complaisance of New Labour about Murdoch is shocking. Murdoch is an overmighty foreigner in our midst. Any prime minister (remember those famous words of Tony Stanley Baldwin) ought to be concerned about unaccountable power, especially as it is brought to bear in the political arena. Yet Blair demurs, his teethmen exulting in their friendship with Murdoch's children and satraps. Has this prime minister no pride? Talk to Mr Clinton, Tony, and ask yourself why a predator who would not be tolerated in the United States can flourish untouched here.

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E-mail correspondents are asked to give a postal address.
Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

LETTERS

Drink-drive laws

It seems that nothing, in recent memory, has aroused such universal compliance as the nation's collective repugnance for drink-driving. Such moral high ground, and the rush to be part of it, should be regarded with some suspicion. Two pints does not make a drunk, yet getting caught is likely to brand you a "drunk-driver" for the rest of your life (report, 3 February).

Most people who stop for a drink leave after two pints. I do it, as do many of my friends. We're not drunks, fiends, or killers of children on zebra crossings, and after two pints we obey every car's eye. We actually drive more carefully after two pints.

Our reactions are not any slower than they are first thing in the morning, when we are in a hurry to get to work, suffering from a cold, daydreaming, angry, preoccupied, or in any of the states of mind and body we drive in, and about which there can be no legislation. Five hundred "alcohol-related" road deaths amongst tens of thousands of others. A little out of proportion, don't you think?

I'm asking for someone to speak out for the two-pints drinker, who wants to drive home without fear of being an easy target for a lazy police statistic. It's time to stop this hysterical scapegoating of people who are doing nothing wrong.

JAMES HANNAWAY
Tring, Hertfordshire

A contribution towards reducing the numbers of drivers who have had too much to drink at the pub would be to ensure that soft drinks are sold at a competitive price.

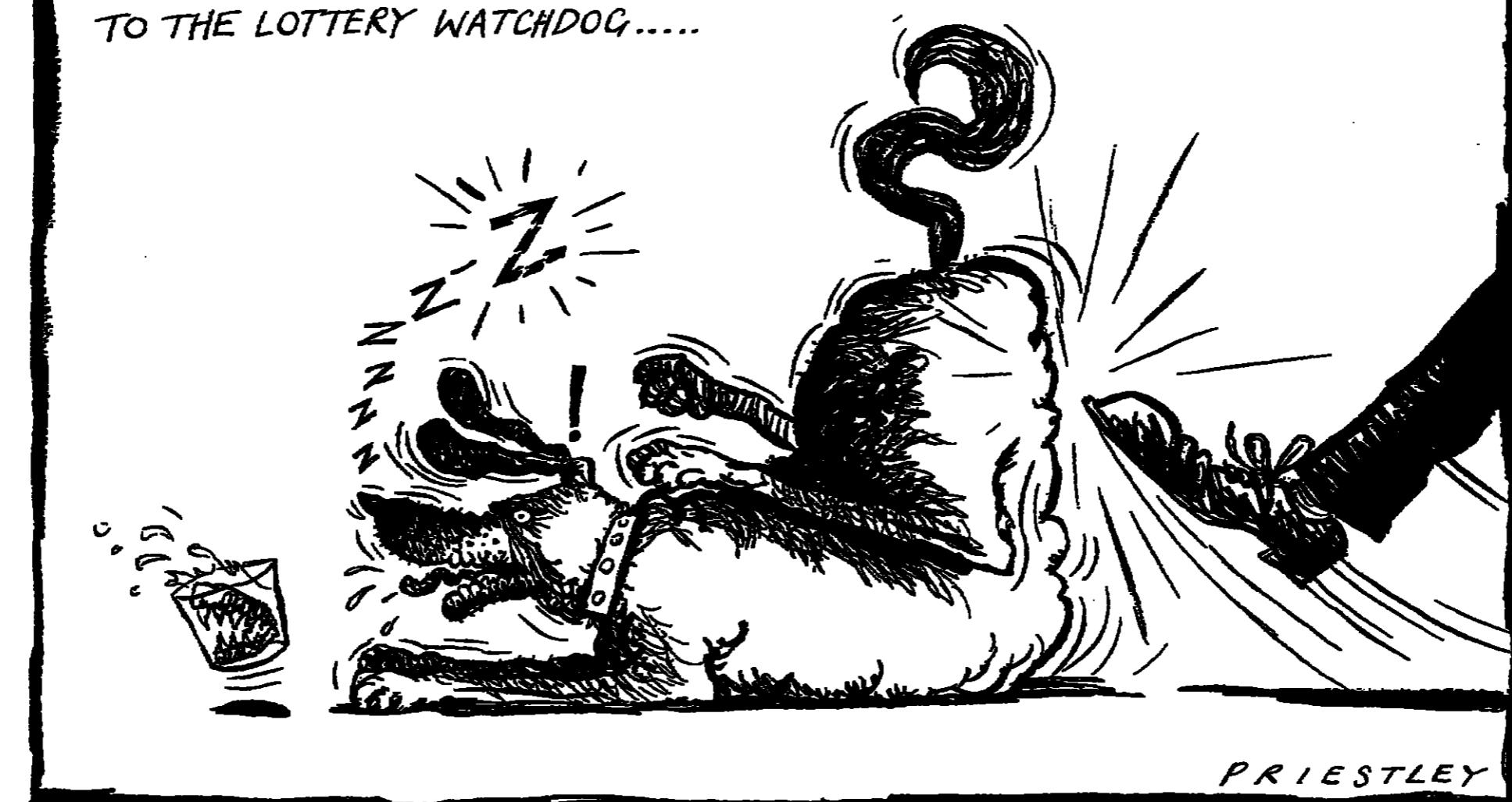
Often my pint of coke is only a few pence cheaper than my husband's pint of beer. The price of a pint of beer is inflated by the taxation levied upon it - why does my soft drink cost about the same amount?

MEGAN C ROBERTSON
Crewe, Cheshire

Anti-culture club

Julian Lloyd Webber ("Stop the dictators of modern music", 22 February) and others who insist on performing classical works by dead and populist composers are not pro-culture, but anti-culture. For every performance of Schumann's *Cléo* Concerto, or CD sale of Britten, there are at least 30 professional musicians, a con-

CHRIS SMITH INTRODUCES HIMSELF TO THE LOTTERY WATCHDOG....



ductor and a fashionable soloist commanding figures for which most young composers could create a whole new work of art.

It is a myth that very few people want to hear contemporary art music. The problem is that the people who don't want to hear it are the ones who have the most disposable income, the most free time, and the loudest voices. If there is a dictatorship of modern music, these people provide it, sustaining the 1990s "burns on seats" justification for artistic enterprise that Mr Webber espouses.

No audience, orchestra or cellist should try to influence what is felt by minds more creative and sensitive than their own and living composers should not allow their curiosity to be marginalised by mediocrity and commercialism. It is true that only the best art survives its own lifetime, we will never discover what is best in the music of today if it is not heard.

MARTIN PARKER
Penkridge, Staffordshire

There is one factor above all others which determines that atonal new classical music (no harmony, no melody, no key or rhythm) reaches the public ear rather than new work by tonal classical composers: the almost total broadcast monopoly of new classical music possessed by Radio 3.

Imagine if there was only one publisher of new literary fiction in the entire country. That is the relation a composer has to Radio 3. In this realm, Radio 3 is an absolute totalitarian state. It is an utter anomaly in the multi-media age.

KEITH BURSTEIN
London SW17

Saving the planet

I should like to counter the suggestion by Hugh Aldersey-Williams (report, 2 February) that, in setting a target of a 20 per cent cut in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010, the British government is guilty of harm-

ful idealism. It is certainly an ambitious undertaking, but attainable. However, public support for such a target may be more forthcoming if the spotlight shifts from global warming to things that more directly and immediately concern us.

For example, with 8 million households receiving some form of benefit, we can assume that a high proportion of these and the "nearly poor" are victims of fuel poverty. Cutting their fuel bills by half by raising the thermal efficiency of their homes would meet an acute social need whilst generating jobs and cutting down on the £1 billion annual health bill attributable to poor housing.

The greatest energy cost in commercial buildings is the electricity bill for lighting. Using the latest lighting technology, the lighting load could be reduced, even in older buildings, at the same time improving on current illumination standards for work stations. New offices that are naturally ventilated

and lit not only save energy; they also produce more amenable working conditions. In cases where corporate headquarters have moved to new "green" premises the result has been a significant cut in absenteeism.

Setting a target date around 2005 for zero-emission city centres would propel car manufacturers into mass producing hybrid vehicles that could be electrically powered in pollution-free zones or when pollution levels are high. What about the new baby Jaguar setting the example? Cleaner air could be a very attractive by-product of the 20 per cent CO₂ cut.

Greater stress should be laid on strategies where saving the planet for future generations coincides with tackling more immediate social, health and economic problems.

PROFESSOR PETER F SMITH
Chairman, Environment and Planning Committee
Royal Institute of British Architects
London W1

A mongrel language

Mrs H Marie Bell (letter, 30 January) recommends phonetic spelling reform to encourage early literacy in children. Fine! Let's write "ov" for "off", "hed" for "head" and eliminate "gh". Go beyond such timid steps, however, and you force millions worldwide to bow down to R.P. Try setting that.

And once children have learned to read only the new code, try getting them to take an interest in the 600 years of English literature which will all suddenly look archaic. Or will they just scroll up a few controversial re-spell Internet versions?

While localised, ethnically pure languages like German can promote a degree of cohesion by imposing a phonetic system favourable to the élite dialect, I'm afraid our hopelessly universal and mongrel language can only retain its own cohesion by, in the main, sticking to its historical morphology.

to grasp which, incidentally, is an education in itself.

BERNARD NOBLE
The Hague, Netherlands

Quick cash

Nigel Pascoe QC, of the Bar Council, says that the QC system recognises ability "in the same way as the appointment of a hospital consultant" ("Baristers attacked for price-fixing as think-tank calls for silk cut", 2 February). Not in remuneration it doesn't! The NHS pays a hospital consultant approximately £150 a day while, on your figures, a QC gets £1,350 a day from legal aid. Does QC stand for Questionable Comparisons?

ANDREW A JEFFREY
Roade, Northamptonshire

You show me yours

Does Iraq have the right to inspect the West's weapons of mass destruction?

PAUL O'HANLON
Runcorn, Cheshire

Thanks to Europe

Phyllida Barstow (letter, 31 January) relates how crossing the Channel used to be an adventure, everything on the other side looking, smelling and tasting different.

I too vividly remember crossing the Channel, into a country in which it was impossible to get a decent meal in whole counties, because even if the ingredients were available, nobody knew what to do with them. A land where women left church early to put the cabbage on, and where the delicatessen was a newsagent's that sold milk.

If England now looks, smells and tastes not that much different from Europe, let us thank our lucky stars.

NICOLAS DU Q BIRD
Bath, Somerset

Phyllida Barstow is overly despondent about the "dead hand of the European Union".

EU-based firms have responded by drawing attention to the national provenance of their products or the brand name. Audi has a sensationalistically effective "this car is German" message ("Vorsprung durch Technik"). VW has made a virtue of Germanic obsession with detail, and advertising has taught us that Beck's beer is made by the "brewmen of Brau", men, Germany.

Such marketing strategies have impact for the simple reason that most people in the EU still believe in the reality of national differences. Ask Nicols and her Papa.

PROFESSOR DAVID HEAD
Department of Modern Languages
University of Northumbria at Newcastle

All in the mind

Your article on George Dyson (Hypewatch, ISM, 31 January) mentions a dynasty of technogurus. You might have mentioned his mother, Verena Huber-Dyson, a distinguished mathematical logician.

On retirement off the coast of British Columbia, she joined the local yacht club to learn navigation. When the class was assigned exercises, the other potential yachtspeople complained that "that lady" always solved all the problems in her head.

IAN HACKING
All Souls College
Oxford

The greatest story ever told – again, and this time, no one gets nailed to a cross



MILES
KINGTON

It was only a matter of time before Disney decided to go for the ultimate and make an animated film based on the life of Jesus. This brave decision has been made partly because it makes sense from a Millennium marketing point of view, partly because other people have retold the story, too. Norman Mailer, most recently, and your very own Lloyd Webber and Rice.

They are not my very own. Disney. Well, they're somebody's. Maybe ours. Yes, I think Rice is ours. Men in all modern Disney films, the hero has been impossibly chunky, with vacant Hollywood beefcake looks. Will this apply to Jesus too? Disney. We are still auditioning for the part of Jesus. Me: You have to audition for an animated part?

Disney. For the voice, yes. Me: But how will you draw him? And will there be a love interest? And will there be a happy ending...? After all, you totally

changed the end of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*...

Disney. Wait, wait! Steady on. We're still formulating the beginning of the film.

We've established Jesus as a baby in the manger...

Me: Gurgling and chuckling, like Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*? Already doing miracles in the crib? With the animals making googoo eyes over the edge of the cot? And the baby donkeys and oxen playing games, tossing the gold, myrrh and frankincense back and forth? And a few birds singing gospel songs in black voices?

Disney. Why, yes! How did you know?

Me: I have seen Disney films before, you know. How are you visualising the 12 disciples?

Disney. As of right now, we are envisaging only seven disciples. They will be called Happy, Saintly, Holy, Moly, Goody, Godly, and Doubtful.

Me: Doubtful?

Disney. Yes. He is based loosely on Doubting Thomas, and he will be the cute, comic one.

Me: How do you have a cute, comic disciple?

Disney. Because whenever he prays he gets the wrong answer to his prayers.

Me: Hmm. Will the disciples be dwarves?

Disney. No. That would not be dignified.

Me: Pontius Pilate will probably be a dwarf. Why?

Disney. So that people do not feel sorry for him when he gets zapped.

Me: Pardon?

Disney. We have been rethinking the end to the New Testament story.

Me: Hold on. Do you mean that Jesus doesn't get crucified?

Disney. Disney. Disney. Disney. Disney.

Disney.

Bill or Tony: which one will history remember?



HAMISH
MCRAE
IN SEARCH OF
THAT BIG IDEA

David Broder, the columnist on *The Washington Post*, made an interesting comparison yesterday between Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. He told Radio 4's *Today* programme that Blair had, in practice, more political power than Clinton, and might go down in the history books as more important – just as Margaret Thatcher would seem more important than Ronald Reagan.

It might seem a little startling to have a top US columnist suggest that Thatcher was more important than Reagan: the latter did after all "win" the Cold War. But if you try and tie down the personal element of the achievement and the influence projected beyond the country's national borders I think the judgement is pretty fair. The US victory over the Soviet Union was not so much a personal achievement of the President, but the cumulative effect of US economic and technical might competing against an economic system that was already falling apart. Margaret Thatcher, working out of a much weaker power-base – the demoralised strike-ridden Britain of 1979 – established a set of ideas which continue to sweep the world.

Not only was Britain the first developed country to promote the notion that governments should seek to become smaller rather than larger, the practical application of that notion became Britain's biggest post-war intellectual export. Last year, China announced the privatisation of its state industries: more than 100 million people on the other side of the world are now having the nature of their employment changed as a result of an idea developed here under Margaret Thatcher.

Now apply the same benchmark to Clinton and Blair: are they developing and promoting ideas that could conceivably sweep the world?

I don't see much that can be attributed directly to Bill Clinton. If you look at the big issues that need to be tackled in the US and see where the new ideas are coming from, they are all bottom-up. Things like the Wisconsin programme to transfer people from welfare to work or the attack on crime in New York are now attracting enormous attention elsewhere in the world (including the UK), but these have nothing to do with the President. If you were looking for a US figure whose ideas might come to have world resonance I guess you might turn to Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board; but the reality is that US influence in the world is much more a general result of economic success than a result of presidential intellect.

And Tony Blair? Well, we don't know, do we? It is quite easy to sketch how the next government is likely to change over the next generation, how the UK happens to be in the right position to be a potential leader in that

process of change, and how Tony Blair has the authority to push it through. But will he?

The quest of Tony Blair is often presented as finding some middle way between the effective but brutal version of market capitalism in America and the faltering welfare state model of Europe. I think actually the challenge to developed-country government is more subtle and more interesting. It is how to redefine the proper role of government in a way that will both foster a more efficient economy and protect, encourage and empower the weakest citizens.

The continental European model has been to get the government to provide the service: to run an extensive (and in many ways excellent) social welfare system as well as building nuclear power stations, high-speed rail links and pouring money into banks like Crédit Lyonnais. We have here been feeling our way towards a different model, one which makes the distinction between the state's responsibility to ensure adequate services and the actual provision of those services. The weapons have been privatisation and regulation: do less and regulate more.

Unsurprisingly we have made a lot of mistakes. Many services that remain largely in public hands (health and education) are not fully satisfying the customers; some services that have been passed to the private sector (eg Virgin's west coast railway line) have yet to do so. Our regulators have had to learn as they go along, and some of them have performed better than others.

What we cannot yet know is whether the Blair government (or governments if he gets back) will just refine and improve this mix of private and public provision, a "let's see what seems to work and give it a push" approach. That is what seems to be happening now: a bit more private sector initiative here, a bit more regulation there; a bit of public-sector spending on the Millennium Dome, a bit of public-sector cash for the Channel link, a bit of private money for the tube.

There is nothing wrong with that. Indeed it may be the best way of learning how governments will have to behave over the next generation: do not have too many grand ideas; just try not to make a mess of things. But it is not going to be a Big Idea we will export to the world. We may export lots of small ideas, as does the US at the moment; but Tony Blair will reap no more credit than Bill Clinton.

There is, however, the outline of a Big Idea floating around, bits of which you can discern both from Tony Blair's speeches and from some government actions. It is that governments will redefine the frontier between what is proper for the public sector and what is proper for the private sector by changing people's perception of their own responsibilities. In other words the state will do less not by abdicating its responsibilities, but by changing people's behaviour so that it does not need to do so much.

This single mothers will not need to rely so much on other taxpayers to support them because they will be able to support themselves. People will not need to use the NHS so much because they are smoking less, exercising and eating healthier foods. We will get richer because we will learn to behave better. This is a concept of government which is really breathtakingly bold, a Big Idea that really would change the entire way in which governments operate in developed countries in the next century. In fact it is really the only way out of the bind in which governments find themselves, caught between higher expectations and smaller resources to fulfil those expectations. And if the message is to "behave better", Mr Blair has a significant advantage over the man in the Oval Office.

So Texas thinks this is a humane substitute for the electric chair?



PAUL
VALLEY
IN THE DEATH
CHAMBER

Blue is the colour of death in Huntsville, Texas. Pale blue. I know because I have been inside the chamber in which the lethal injection is administered. Indeed I have leaned against the padded metal gurney to which Karla Faye Tucker was last night due to be strapped. I looked up. Overhead was a neon light and the ceiling of powder blue. Such is the final earthly sight of the condemned prisoner. "A psychologist suggested that colour," the assistant warden told me. "It is very relaxing." It minimises the urge to struggle, apparently.

The gurney is the only piece of furniture in the death chamber in the Walls Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections prison. To the side is a window like that of the control booth in a TV studio. Karla Tucker nominated five people to watch her die from behind the thick plate glass, the maximum number of personal witnesses allowed. Three relatives of her victims also asked to be present.

But there is another room, hidden from the view of the condemned individual. It houses the equipment from which the fatal cocktail is administered by an official who cannot see the person the state has decided to kill. Three tubes feed into a single catheter which passes through the wall and to the gurney. Along it passes pavulon (a muscle relaxant), sodium thiopental (the lethal poison) and potassium chloride (which stops the heart dead). "If you don't get the balance right," the assistant governor told me, "he will kick like a horse".

It was "he" in those days. Executions are a pretty routine thing in Texas. But they were all men. Karla Faye Tucker is the first woman to be executed there since the American Civil War. "I don't like doing it, but it is a part of my job," said the man responsible for the protocol of the executions as he outlined the rules on who is allowed to visit in the Death Cell and on the convict's last shower, change of clothes and final meal. Karla Tucker, we are told, requested a banana,

peaches and a tossed salad. Very healthy.

There is a ghastly irony about so much to do with the execution process. Apart from the thick broad straps of fawn leather by the metal bed, the atmosphere in the chamber is medical. There is a strap to wrap around the condemned arm just like the one the doctor uses when you have a blood sample taken. And before the deadly needle is inserted, the arm is thoughtfully swabbed with disinfectant. The person who inserts the needle in the arm is not the same one who then activates

until the new technology made him redundant. His contempt for the lethal injection was almost palpable.

"If a man is sentenced to death, he ought to have something to fear rather than a needle which lets him go to sleep. When you kick that motor on and you hear it moan – well, that gets him a little upset," said the grizzled old executioner over coffee at a small-town diner where the tables were covered in red-checked gingham. I recalled the story that former head of the Texas prison service had told me. "I had to supervise

tained his innocence, but few people believed him.

Looking into the eyes of a man who is condemned to die it is hard to resist the temptation to make a judgement. The young Hispanic convict sat in a metal cage and peered through a slot of thick reinforced glass. For some reason throughout the interview I was seized with the compulsion that I had to decide whether I believed him. The courts should stop playing these games. If one of us kidnapped someone and locked them up for ten years and told them every day that they were to be

Photograph: AP

Before the deadly needle is inserted the arm of the condemned prisoner is thoughtfully swabbed with disinfectant

the plunger, so that responsibility is shared, just as with a firing squad some soldiers are given blanks. No doctors are involved in the act (though one is on hand to certify death) and yet there seems about the process an unnatural and rather wilful inversion of the Hippocratic Oath, much as there is in satanic parades of Christian worship. In this atmosphere the cold courtesy of the prison officials seemed to me to be chilling.

All this was some years ago. I had gone to Huntsville not long after Texas abandoned death by electrocution for the "more humane" injection. Just down the road from the redbrick jail, I met Sam Gilstrap, who for 26 years had been the master mechanic for the electric chair

killed, people would say it was a barbaric crime, but for the state it is legal. It is like abortion; it is the very same people who are against killing babies who are in favour of killing me," he said.

It was, I remember thinking at the time, not a disaster so much as an expression of bewilderment. "The reason I agreed to talk to you was so people can see that I have feelings too, that I'm not an animal. This

is a human being speaking. Is it right to do this?"

All at once I was overcome with the certainty that he was guilty. And yet, at the same time, I knew his guilt was a matter of utter irrelevance in the face of what was about to happen. He was one of 250 men and three women on Death Row. They were not the only murderers in the jail, and indeed many of those not under sentence of death had committed crimes far more heinous. But they had lost in the legal lottery in a state where 90 per cent of cases are settled by plea bargaining in which the accused accepts a lighter sentence in return for a guilty plea. It was the poor, the simple and the inept who ended up on Death Row, the ones who couldn't afford a decent lawyer.

If only Karla Tucker had had one she might have been able to transform her case into a gender issue earlier, just as O J Simpson turned his trial into one about race and Louise Woodward's became one about whether mothers should go out to work. Had Tucker harnessed at a much earlier stage the support which has mushroomed from born-again Christians (after her conversion), anti-death penalty liberals and most latterly women's groups, it might have been a different story. But for Karla Tucker fame, it seems, came a little too late.

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Paddy Ashdown killed my guinea pig ...



GLENDA
COOPER
UNWANTED
HOUSE GUESTS

work: get off the dole or we're sending Paddy round to stay. (Certainly it's likely to have a greater effect than any Job Seekers' Allowance or childcare scheme.)

The organiser of the visit, a Liberal Democrat councillor, said Paddy's hosts wished to remain anonymous to avoid the pressure of the media glare: That means that we can only imagine what could possibly happen when a brave politician goes to seek "real views from real people" ...

It's 00:00 hours (or 5.35pm to you or me) and three masked men in camouflage gear and a dog knock down the front door of the council house belonging to George, Julie and their children Jack and Susan. Flat against the wall, the men swear and the living room and the dining room chairs. Then one pulls off his mask: "At ease, troops. Hi, I'm Paddy Ashdown. Great to meet some real people instead of hanging out with the Young Lib Dems. Let's discuss Labour's planned shake-up of the benefits system." His faithful mongrel, Luke, gives Jack a lick as Paddy gets out his Geordie translation book.

Now everyone has heard that this government's imperative is to get as many people off benefits as possible. And presumably this is their latest secret weapon in welfare-to-

choose. The kids seem to be concentrating on a soap opera called *Neighbours* (which Paddy notes doesn't seem to quite fit the party's stance on finding local solutions to local problems) and Julie is concerned about starting tea.

"Don't worry – let's forage!" shouts Paddy. "We had to in Borneo you know!" He returns a few minutes later with a small furry animal which he kills with his bare hands. "I've eaten rats before – we had hard times in the Marines," he says.

Young Susan starts to cry: "You've killed Bubbles the guinea pig, you horrible, horrid man! Boohoooho." Paddy looks apologetic. "Oh damn, not again. Difficult to tell in the dark, I'm so sorry," he says. There is a ferocious knocking at the door. He springs up again. "A riot! We get an awful lot of those in Yeovil too you know. I once fought off a knife-wielding attacker with an old Special Boat Service trick." He opens the door suddenly and pounces on the intruder. Unfortunately, the little old lady he jumps on gives him a stinging left hook and tells him: "Get your filthy hands off me, young man. I'm not that kind of girl," she squawks. "Julie, those local lads are caus-

ing trouble again. Three of them dressed up playing silly buggers have uprooted my best apple tree and fence."

"I think that was Mr Ashdown, Ma'am," says Julie. "I think they were using the twigs as disguise. It's something politicians do."

"Ex yes," says another of the camouflage men. "Sorry about that. We didn't know what else to use. Have a Young Lib Dem spiff in compensation."

"Don't mind if I do," says Paddy, the good lady, accidentally kicking Paddy quite viciously on the shin as she sits down. "Paddy Ashdown did you say? Isn't your real name Paddy Pantos? Didn't I hear ..."

"Great, the whole family is finally together," breaks in Paddy. "Now we can really discuss what you think of the welfare state."

There is a stunned silence. "Well I think it's a good idea," ventures George.

"I don't think lone parent benefit should be cut," adds Julie.

"Can we watch *EastEnders*?" chorus Jack and Susan.

"But do you think that Labour is backtracking on their election pledges? What do you think of the Tories opposing a

£65m benefit cut that they had proposed in government? What do you think of the Lib Dem proposals?" adds Paddy.

"It's time for tea," says Julie with relief.

Throughout the meal Paddy cross-examines each member of the family for half an hour about their knowledge of the childcare disregard, pensioners' one-off winter payments and disability living allowance. Adding up the marks at the end, Susan, and Jack tie, with Susan winning the tie break for knowing Harriet Harman's middle name. She's given a Lib Dem "Make a Difference" election poster as a prize. At 8.20pm Paddy pronounces it time for bed.

"But we haven't seen the end of *EastEnders* yet," sulks Jack, still miffed over Harriet. Paddy looks surprised. "But we're getting up at 6.15am to read through the papers. My overnight team will have provided a brief on the media. Then we're going jogging and a few physical jerks – *mens sana in corpore sano*."

"I've hurt my ankle," says Julie.

"Oh don't worry. It's something I've adapted from the All Work test to see if you're eligible for disability benefit. Most

people who have to do it are much more ill than you are," replies Paddy cheerily.

Darkness descends on the house in Denton as Paddy sleeps peacefully curled up with his Marie Teddy Bear and a copy of the 1997 manifesto. So soundly that he does not hear the furtive footsteps outside his door and the quiet closing of the front door.

Outside the Job Centre George and his family shiver, waiting for dawn to break and the centre to open. Soon they are joined by two other families huddling together in horror.

"What are you doing here?" they all ask. The other two snort in derision at George's tale. "Paddy Ashdown! Gosh you're so lucky. We've been up since four singing hymns with Tony and Cherie. And we had to put up with Twenty Questions on the Millennium Dome."

"Pah that's nothing," said the others. "We've been doing transcendental meditation with William Hague all night. When Ffion started singing "Land of My Fathers" to drown out the chanting, we switched on the ghetto blaster. And when they threatened to call for Cecil Parkinson we left. Never again. Just give me a job and get them out of here."

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GUS stuns City by launching hostile £1.6bn bid for Argos

Great Universal Stores surprised the stock market yesterday with a £1.6bn hostile bid for Argos, the catalogue retailer. Argos rejected the bid as 'opportunist' and must fight the takeover without its chief executive who is seriously ill. Nigel Cope, City Correspondent reports.

GUS turned hostile after failing to agree terms with the Argos management during two meetings in the past week. GUS pitched its cash offer at 570p but the Argos share price soared 42 per cent to 630p, indicating that the City regards it as only an opening shot. GUS shares closed 29p higher at 762p.

'At the right price it is an attractive deal but it would not look so good much over 630p,' said Nick Bubb at SG Securities. Argos rejected the offer and advised its shareholders to reject the offer. Argos also announced that its chief executive, Mike Smith, is unable to undertake his full range of duties and is undergoing a course of medical treatment. The company has decided to search for a new chief executive designate. 'To describe it [the bid] as opportunistic in view of all the circumstances would be an understatement,' it said.

Analysts were sceptical that a counter-bidder would emerge. Some suggested Kingfisher but it would run into regulatory difficulties as in Woolworths chain has a high market share in toys in which Argos is also strong.

It is GUS's first ever hostile bid in its 80-year history and will be funded by around £1bn debt, the first time the company has owed a penny since the 1950s. Lord Wolfson, GUS chairman, first approached Argos nine months ago about a possible link in home shopping. It held bid talks with Sir Richard Lloyd, the Argos chairman, twice in the last week but they broke down on price. 'Our impression was that they agreed there was a certain logic to the deal but there was a big gap on price,' Lord Wolfson said.

GUS said its offer represented a 40 per cent premium to the closing Argos price on 27 January. Lord Wolfson said the logic of the deal was not to cut costs or clear out the Argos management, most of whom would be retained. He said the deal would give GUS a high street presence with 433 stores, which could be used to build a valuable database on customer shopping habits.

A deal would enable GUS to offer Argos products through its own catalogues, and to include Kay's and Choice, and to include GUS ranges in the Argos product selection. GUS also said it would be able to help Argos build a home shopping and home delivery operation at a fraction of the cost of the programme planned by Argos. It said it would be able to offer call centres, and a delivery infrastructure using its White Arrow van network, which handles 110 million parcels a year. GUS would also be able to offer credit to customers using its Experian finance operation.

Lord Wolfson said Argos had been facing considerable pressure as rivals grabbed market share in its core markets of toys and general goods. Argos rejected the offer as 'opportunist' and must fight the takeover without its chief executive who is seriously ill. Nigel Cope, City Correspondent reports.

It is GUS's first ever hostile bid in its 80-year history and will be funded by around £1bn debt, the first time the company has owed a penny since the 1950s. Lord Wolfson, GUS chairman, first approached Argos nine months ago about a possible link in home shopping. It held bid talks with Sir Richard Lloyd, the Argos chairman, twice in the last week but they broke down on price. 'Our impression was that they agreed there was a certain logic to the deal but there was a big gap on price,' Lord Wolfson said.

The offer is a huge blow to Argos, which was one of the stock market's star performers in 1995 and early 1996 but has since fallen from grace. 'It is escapable that Argos has run out of steam,' said Richard Hyman of Verdict Research. 'But it is a good business and is not dead and buried.' He said among its problems were a mature market, price competition from rivals, and few exclusive products that could not be bought elsewhere. He said some consumers might have deserted the stores for shops with slightly better service and a superior store environment.

It has been seeking new routes to customers and planned to roll out a national home shopping operation next year.

The deal would mark a return to the high street for GUS, which in the 1960s had more than 2,000 stores. It represents a further step in the revitalisation of GUS under Lord Wolfson, who became chairman in autumn 1996. During his tenure the once sleepy group has already paid £1bn for Experian, an American credit scoring and database company.

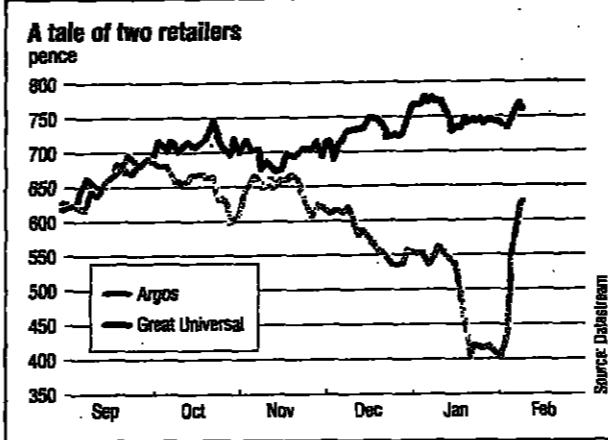
It is thought GUS might merge the Burberry operation, which has 60 UK stores, at some stage. Lord Wolfson admitted yesterday a merger might be possible in three to five years.

Outlook, page 21



Cash call: GUS claims it could slash the cost of developing Argos' home shopping operation

Photograph: Andrew Buurman



ARGOS

- The company is 25 years old and the first 17 stores opened in 1973
- Bought by BAT Industries in 1979 and floated on the stock market in 1990
- It has 430 stores in the UK and Ireland
- It employs an average of 55,000 people
- In 1996 it made a pre-tax profit of £41m on sales of £1.7bn
- It is the leading catalogue chain store and is third in the world
- Seven out of ten households have a copy of an Argos catalogue
- It had a stock market value of £3.27bn as at close of trading on Monday

GUS

- Known as GUS, founded in 1917
- It had a stock market value of £7.37bn as at close of trading on Monday
- It achieved 48 consecutive years of profit growth until 1997, when profits fell to £57m on £2.7bn turnover
- Until recently the company had a policy for a conservative profit policy of organic growth
- It employs about 35,000 people
- Its main divisions are home shopping, Burberry, overseas retailing, information services, customer and corporate finance and property

Treasury nets £100m as taxpayers miss January deadline

The Government yesterday admitted that nearly a million taxpayers had failed to send in self-assessment tax returns on time for last Saturday's deadline, netting the Treasury up to £100m in fines. But ministers made a surprise concession to those who made innocent mistakes by offering a week's extension to some.

Dawn Primarolo, the financial secretary to the Treasury, set a new deadline for taxpayers who make mistakes. Taxpayers will now have until the 11 February to correct and return the forms.

An estimated 400,000 taxpayers – just under 5 per cent – made oversights in filling in their tax returns and had them sent back. Many faced a £100 penalty for missing the deadline because of unwitting errors.

"In this first year of self-assessment, I am prepared to be flexible. Where forms which were already returned to taxpayers are corrected and sent back by 11 February, they will be regarded as having met the deadline," Ms Primarolo said.

Final figures show that 810,000 taxpayers missed the deadline altogether, plus 70,000 partnerships and 20,000 trusts. Those who missed will be fined £100 each unless the tax liability is less than £100.

– Andrew Verity

The taxpayers who missed the deadline will not only face a fine. They will also receive estimated bills from the Revenue – usually higher than their own estimates. A surcharge of 5 per cent will apply to tax outstanding by the end of February.

Accountants yesterday attacked the Treasury for being far too harsh – given its own record of mistakes.

These included a failure to publish essential software, needed to process forms, before October. Accountants normally start work on tax returns at least nine months before deadline.

Nigel Eastaway, of the Chartered Institute of Taxation, said: "The concession is welcome but it doesn't go far enough. We think it's a bit harsh when a lot of people have been burning the midnight oil to get the forms done. It would have been appropriate as a gesture for the Revenue to have adopted a lighter touch."

Only those who have what the Revenue thinks is a "reasonable excuse" will be let off. Excuses such as "the tax return was too difficult" or "My accountant was slow" are not thought reasonable. Reasonable excuses include a flood in the Post Office, theft of tax records or the death of a close relative.

– Andrew Verity

Fresh jobless estimate will provide a truer picture

Official unemployment figures will in future give a truer picture of how many people cannot find work.

The Government's statistics office is to downplay the discredited figures for the number of benefit claimants in favour of a measure in line with international standards. Diane Coyle, Economics Editor, reports.

Starting in April, the headline jobless total will appear to jump from some 500,000 to about 1.9 million as the result of a decision

by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to emphasise an alternative measure of unemployment conforming to international standards, and downplay the current total.

The decision – first reported in *The Independent* last October but delayed by last-ditch resistance within Whitehall – does not go as far as some critics would like. The ONS is to base a monthly estimate of the number of people seeking jobs and available to work on the quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS).

Like the critics of the many "fiddles" which helped reduce the headline claimant count over the years, the ONS would have preferred to switch to a full monthly survey of the jobs

market. But the cost of at least £10m a year was prohibitive. The compromise will cost about £250,000 a year.

Tim Holt, director of the ONS, said: "There has been a lack of confidence in the labour market figures and this has affected public confidence in statistics at large."

He added he expected the Government would soon be holding consultation on its commitment to create an independent statistical service.

The ONS will continue to publish the number of claimants, as this is readily available from benefit offices.

John Philpott, director of the Employment Policy Institute, an independent think-tank, said:

"This is a step in the right direction."

But he added that even the new, internationally comparable measure left out some unemployed people such as lone parents who might not be actively looking for work but whose the Government was keen to get into jobs.

The two measures – the claimant count and the existing quarterly LFS unemployment total – have tended to move in the same direction. Both have fallen rapidly in the past two years and the gap is now as wide as it has ever been.

However, at least 10 changes to benefit rules since 1979 have all helped to reduce the number of claimants by far more

than what most economists would take as a "true" measure of unemployment.

As a result, the headline jobless total became one of the most discredited and politicised of all official statistics. It was criticised by the Royal Statistical Society, the House of Commons Employment Committee and even the former head of the Office for National Statistics, Bill Maclellan.

In future, the ONS will present a more detailed monthly picture of the jobs market, such as an analysis of full and part-time employment, temporary and permanent jobs, and reasons for "economic inactivity", such as being in full-time education.

Eurorail poised to retender for Channel Tunnel rail link

Eurorail, the consortium which lost out in the bidding to build the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, is set to announce it is interested in retendering for the project.

The five partners in Eurorail – Kvaerner Construction, Balfour Beatty, HSBC Holdings, NatWest and Seaboard, are expected to meet in the next two days and confirm their interest in submitting a fresh bid by the end of the week.

Meanwhile, Railtrack is due to decide formally whether to submit a rival bid to rescue the troubled project at a board meeting a week tomorrow.

Eurorail originally asked for £1.7bn in taxpayers' support.

Eurorail lost the competition to build the 68-mile link in 1996 after it asked the Government for £500m more in subsidies than the winning bidder, London & Continental Railways.

LCR last week told the Government that it could not proceed with the project because revenues from the Eurostar service – a vital part of its financing plans – were £2.5bn below its original forecasts. The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, rejected its application for a further £1.2bn in subsidies.

Eurorail also has more experience of the CTRL than

any other group, having been involved in the project since 1988, when it was originally conceived as a joint venture.

The consortium contacted the Government last November, asking to be kept informed of developments, after LCR began running into financing difficulties.

Railtrack confirmed that one option being studied was to build the link in phases so that the high-speed line would initially end at Ebbsfleet in north Kent and then continue to Waterloo International. This would cut £1.2bn from costs.

Eurorail also has more experience of the CTRL than

– Michael Harrison

Staff at UBS, the Swiss bank, will bear the brunt of job cuts resulting from the merger with SBC, it was confirmed yesterday.

The redundancies will be "particularly extensive" at UBS offices in London because of the need to "keep the successful Warburg Dillon Read [owned by SBC] teams in place," according to Mathis Cabialavetta, UBS's chief executive.

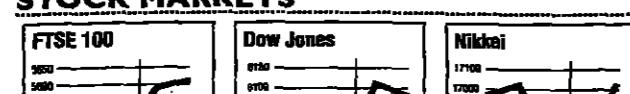
The two Swiss banks are expected to cut 3,000 London jobs, about half their combined City workforce. Details of redundancies will be announced within weeks.

Speaking at an emergency general meeting of UBS shareholders, who yesterday formally approved the SBC deal, Mr Cabialavetta said: "Warburg Dillon Read, the highly regarded and successful investment bank, gives SBC a competitive edge in London's financial market place.

It would be a mistake not to leverage this franchise for maximum advantage... This naturally implies a considerable shedding of jobs at UBS."

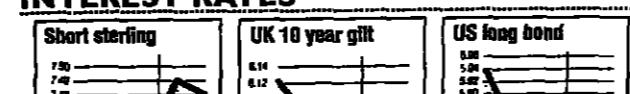
SBC shareholders will today vote on the deal in a separate extraordinary general meeting. – Leo Frizzell

STOCK MARKETS



Indices: FTSE 100, Dow Jones, Nikkei. Price (p), Change (p), % Change, 52 wk high, 52 wk low, Yield (%)

INTEREST RATES



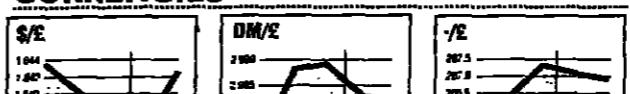
Money Market Rates: Short sterling, UK 10 year gilt, US long bond. Index: 3 month, 1 yr, 5 yrs, 10 yrs, 30 yrs. Bond Yields: 1 yr, 5 yrs, 10 yrs, 30 yrs, Long bond, 1 yr, 5 yrs, 10 yrs, 30 yrs.

MAIN PRICE CHANGES

Rises: Price (p), Chg (p), % Chg. Falls: Price (p), Chg (p), % Chg.

Argos: 561.80, 13.80, 0.25, 5616.10, 4189.10, 3.21. Balfour Beatty: 4915.90, 37.50, 0.77, 4960.90, 4384.20, 3.25. BT: 2665.40, 9.00, 0.34, 2665.90, 2073.70, 3.21. BT All Share: 2597.58, 8.52, 0.33, 2594.02, 2056.07, 3.20. BTSE SmallCap: 2388.60, 3.90, 0.16, 2404.40, 2162.00, 3.17. BTSE Fledgling: 1299.20, 0.10, 0.03, 1245.40, 1120.20, 3.17. Dow Jones: 881.20, 6.10, 0.63, 1138.00, 965.90, 1.24. Dow Jones: 8807.80, 19.92, -0.25, 8265.03, 7656.78, 1.70. Nikkei: 17022.98, 248.16, 1.47, 2051.79, 14488.21, 0.50. Hang Seng: 10263.01, 53.09, -0.45, 1820.31, 7809.13, 3.80. Dax: 4532.52, 9.71, 0.22, 4531.93, 3032.34, 1.77.

CURRENCIES



Pound: 7.56, 1.25, 7.48, 0.87, -1.25, 8.05, -1.48. DM/£: 0.6847, 0.53, 1.0230. Yen: 207.49, -32.03, 194.07. Yen: 125.96, -30.75, 121.70. Euro: 104.26, -0.60, 95.30. 5 index: 109.20, -0.40, 102.20.

OTHER INDICATORS

Falls: Price (p), Chg (p), % Chg. Brent Oil (\$): 507.00, 188.00, 22.94. Gold (\$): 295.85, -6.40, 344.45. Silver (\$): 6.39, 0.14, 4.91. Baa8 Rates: 7.25, 6.00.

www.bloomberg.com/uk

source: Bloomberg

TOURIST RATES



الآن من الأداء

A touch of the old Wolfson in GUS's Argos bid



OUTLOOK
ON THE £1.6BN BID
FOR ARGOS, THE
PROPOSED GLAXO-
SMITHKLINE MERGER
AND THE NEW OFFER
FOR ENERGY GROUP

The spirit of Sir Isaac Wolfson seems to have been reborn in his nephew David, judging by the whirlwind of activity to have swept Great Universal Stores since he took the reigns a year and a half ago. On top of a series of inspired acquisitions in data processing now comes an opportunistic £1.6bn bid for Argos.

GUS has struck just when Argos is at its most vulnerable. Its chief executive is incapacitated with a life-threatening disease and its share price has been hammered by a series of profit warnings. Its once successful formula of catalogue retailing has matured and Argos is under fierce competitive pressure in all three of its main product lines – in toys from Woolies, in jewellery from a revitalised Signet, and in electrical goods from Dixons.

Furthermore, its expansion into home shopping, though clearly the right long-term strategy, is going to take both time and money – and lots of them. Here, then, in the present Lord Wolfson of Sunningdale is a touch of his uncle Sir Isaac's legendary ruthlessness. Hit them when they are down and hit them hard.

But there is also some of the old pirate's business vision too. GUS already has the home shopping infrastructure Argos wants to build. All Lord Wolfson needs to do is to take the Argos brand and feed it through his own systems – no need for the expensive duplication of warehousing, call centres and distribution that Argos is intent on building. Even Argos is hard pressed to disagree with the business logic of what's proposed.

The difficulty comes on price. GUS's

£70p a share is 16.5 times forecast earnings for this year. There are eight British retailers trading on higher multiples than this, so even accepting that Argos is in something of a bind, that's not much of a bid premium.

All the same, the stock market may have overreacted by driving up the price to 630p. In the absence of a rival bid from, say, Kingfisher or one of the big Continental mail order companies, it seems unlikely GUS would be prepared to go so high or that Argos could justify such a valuation on its own. Lord Wolfson doesn't need to buy Argos, and he's stubborn enough to walk away from it.

Is this merger good for Britain?

One irony for regulators in dealing with the proposed merger of Glaxo Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham is that they've been here once before. Beecham made a hostile takeover bid for Glaxo in the early 1970s when both companies were minnows compared to what they are today. That deal was referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, which eventually ruled it to be against the public interest on the grounds that having two research and development facilities was better for jobs and scientific advancement than just one.

Supporters of the present wave of merger mania argue that the world has greatly changed since then. For a start, both companies are now global in their reach

and organisation, as is the market for pharmaceuticals. Furthermore, the cost of new drug discovery and development is now so vast that only the biggest can hope to do it successfully across a range of different products. In other words, the case for the defence goes, this merger would be positively good for Britain, even though it will mean job losses among scientists and one R&D facility instead of two, because it would create a national champion in a pretty much unassailable position compared to competitors in terms of drug discovery.

Arguments like this are much better accepted by regulators, both in London and Brussels, than they were. Even so, policy-makers should be careful not to become too beholden to the process of globalisation. Before the merger of Glaxo and Wellcome, Britain had no less than four pharmaceutical companies up there among the world leaders. After this latest merger, we will be down to just one behemoth, an also-ran in the shape of Zeneca (which Sir Richard Sykes would also acquire, given the chance), and a smattering of biotechs.

The effect of this will be to concentrate a very large proportion of Britain's private sector R&D expenditure in the hands of just one company. Regardless of the supposed need for scale in successful modern-day pharmaceuticals research, this cannot be an entirely healthy development. To believe otherwise requires the usual rules of innovation to be suspended, for the greatest chance of new product development normally lies in diversity and competition, not hegemony.

Who knows, perhaps pharmaceuticals are different, but don't count on it. Pressure for consolidation, not just in pharmaceuticals but in other industries too, comes primarily from investors keen to see margins protected and enhanced in an ever more competitive world. Any management that resists this pressure or falls behind in the race to consolidate, will rapidly find itself out the door.

Plainly the process of consolidation is in the interests of shareholders for it enables management to counter the persistent downward pressure on prices with growing scale and market clout. Whether it is in the public interest is another matter. Unfortunately, the flood may now be too strong for politicians and regulators to turn, even if they thought there was a case for doing so.

PacifiCorp offer should do the trick

The boys from Portland, Oregon are back and this time they are more serious. But are they serious enough? PacifiCorp's 765p offer for Energy Group has been taken as a sighting shot rather than a knockout blow, which is why the market price remains comfortably above the revised offer terms and why Energy Group is keeping the door open to rival offers.

As a means of flushing out Texas Utilities and Nomura, however, PacifiCorp's increased bid ought to do the trick. In the

event of a three-way auction, Energy Group could go for something north of 800p, valuing the business at nearly £4.3bn – a 43 per cent premium to its market value before PacifiCorp popped its head out of the Oregon woods eight months ago. Who said the Americans' appetite for British regional electricity companies was on the wane?

Actually it is rather hard to see how Energy Group's prospects have improved materially since PacifiCorp's first tilt at 695p was put on ice by Margaret Beckett and the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. If anything, Peabody looks even more of a bombarded US coal business while the regulatory climate for UK Rels is scarcely any less hostile. There is one thing that's changed, however, and that's the direction of long-term interest rates. When, like PacifiCorp, three quarters of the funding is in the form of debt, these things are important.

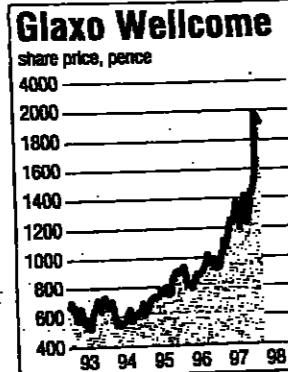
At this stage in the game, PacifiCorp also has the priceless advantage of MMC clearance. Just because it is another US utility, Texas cannot assume a bid would escape scrutiny, given its attitude to

running a nuclear business and the effect Guy Hands at Nortura will also have to earn every penny of his reputed £40m salary if he is to construct a deal which stacks up financially for the Japanese. Unlike his previous sorties into pubs and train leasing, regulators would not allow him get away with mortgaging off Eastern's revenue stream.

Union challenges drug giants as City voices concerns on merger

Large institutional shareholders in Glaxo Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham yesterday raised concerns about the huge payouts and salaries that could be awarded to the directors of both companies if their blockbuster merger goes through. As Andrew Yates and Barry Clement report, the biggest deal in corporate history could also face a legal threat from union officials concerned about mass redundancies.

One fund manager said: "The directors already stand to make a lot of money and we would be concerned if they also forced



through a large rise in salaries following the deal."

The executive directors could net almost £35m between them and Glaxo directors could receive a huge pay rise as they earn significantly less than their SmithKline counterparts.

While most fund managers welcomed the merger and recognised it would have buoyed up the companies' share prices in the short term, some questioned the long-term prospects

for the combined group. One institutional shareholder said: "This looks more like a defensive move. Research and development costs are rising all the time. With both companies looking over the precipice this move will underpin earnings for the next few years... but after that the outlook is negative."

Another fund manager said: "Margins could be whittled away by competition and any cost savings may have to be reinvested in the business."

These concerns prompted several large institutions to sell shares yesterday, pushing Glaxo's price down 56p to 1,927p, and SmithKline's price was down 14.5p to 830.5p.

Meanwhile, MSF, the science trade union, claimed workers' rights had been ignored and argued the companies were in breach of European law on employee consultation.

Roger Lyons, general secre-

tary of MSF, said management had a "clear and demonstrable" obligation to talk to union officials about the employment implications of the merger. Mr Lyons estimated that up to 10,000 jobs might be at risk because of the "overlap" between the two companies.

His protests prompted a letter from the head of the City's Panel on Takeovers and Mergers in support of its contention. In a letter to MSF, Alistair Defreuz, director-general of the panel, confirmed that voluntary codes on secrecy did not override European laws insisting on consultation, provided the talks were held in secret. The MSF leader pointed out that quoted companies had often cited City rules when withholding information and argued the letter therefore constituted a "watershed" in employee relations.

The MSF general secretary has also written to Margaret Beckett, President of the Board of Trade, expressing his concern over the potential loss of key scientific expertise. He estimated that the companies accounted for around a fifth of the jobs in research and development in the private sector in Britain.

Mr Lyons said his union did not oppose the merger, but "the case for it has not been made". On the issue of consultation Mr Lyons said employees had been treated like "serfs" and that it was time the rights enjoyed by people as citizens were extended to the workplace.

A Glaxo spokesman said all figures for potential redundancies were "pure speculation". Detailed work had to be completed before it was finally decided to press ahead with the merger.

The spokesman said his company had a policy of "open and comprehensive" communications with employees and that information would be made available as soon as possible.

Outlook, this page

BSkyB issues writ in row over Premier League TV rights

The simmering disagreement between BSkyB and Carlton over the rights to show Premier League football turned into a slanging match yesterday as BSkyB served a writ on Carlton demanding that Michael Green's media group cough up its share of a £60m payment owed to BSkyB. Peter Thol Larsen reports.

Carlton refused to back down, arguing that it would not pay until it was sure that British Digital Broadcasting (BDB), its multi-channel joint venture with Granada, would be able to show live Premier League matches when it launches in the autumn.

A Carlton spokesman said: "We are entirely right not to pay until BSkyB in full until they have secured Premier League rights for digital terrestrial television. The Premier League are ready, willing and able to negotiate but Sky has dragged its feet."

The argument stems from last year, when regulators forced BSkyB to pull out of the BDB consortium on the grounds that

its involvement was anti-competitive. In compensation, Carlton and Granada agreed to pay BSkyB £75m, while the satellite broadcaster said it would still supply its channel to BDB.

However, Granada and Carlton subsequently refused to pay all but £15m of the agreed sum until BSkyB got the go-ahead from the Premier League to extend its rights to live football to include BDB. Although BSkyB is understood to have offered about £3m a year for the rights, this was rejected. The Premier League is believed to want £15m a year. BSkyB has yet to make another offer.

Granada has since paid its share of the £60m, thereby avoiding an embarrassing conflict of interest for Gerry Robinson, who is chairman of both BSkyB and Granada. But Carlton is holding out.

Yesterday Mark Booth, BSkyB's chief executive, hit out at Carlton's stand. "Obviously it's not the best way to establish a relationship but if they want a fight they can have one," he said, adding: "I can't foresee a scenario that Carlton don't pay. I think they will come to their senses."

Industry experts said that, while BSkyB was on firm ground legally, a refusal to supply BDB with live football could attract the attention of the regulators. "It would be a clear abuse of their monopoly power," said one.

His comments came as BSkyB reported a 4 per cent drop in pre-tax profits to £128.6m in the six months to 31 December. The company ascribed the drop to slower growth in its subscriber base – the number of paying subscribers increased by 349,000 to 6.721m in the period – and the high cost of preparing for the launch of its 200-channel digital satellite service. Earnings per share dropped from 7.1p to 6.8p, while the interim dividend was maintained at 2.75p.

Meanwhile, Pace Micro Technology and Amstrad, two of the four companies which are supplying digital set-top box decoders for BSkyB, both confirmed that they would be ready to supply the decoders in time for the June launch.

Mr Booth confirmed that the digital service would be launched in June, but admitted that the "meaningful" launch would not take place until the run-up to Christmas. BSkyB shares closed up 19p at 361p.

Investment column, page 22



Optimist: Analysts believe Sir Richard Sykes' confidence is well founded

Masterminding the biggest merger ever, to produce the third biggest company in the world, would not only exalt Sir Richard Sykes, chairman of drug giant Glaxo Wellcome. It would assure his place in corporate history.

Sir Richard describes Glaxo's £9.4bn hostile takeover of Wellcome in March 1995 as the most thrilling period of his life. The £11.7bn merger of his group with SmithKline Beecham would put that in the shade.

Few would have written this script when he joined Glaxo as deputy chief executive of the research division in 1986. He was known merely as a scientist while the corporate path to the top appeared blocked by a host of charismatic figures.

But by March 1993 potential competitors such as Bernard Taylor and Ernie Mario had fallen by the wayside and Sir Richard was – to the surprise of City observers at the time – installed as deputy chairman and chief executive of Glaxo plc.

Knighted in 1994, he became chairman of the combined Glaxo Wellcome group in May last year. But he remains a down to earth family man, his Yorkshire accent linking him still to his birthplace, a village outside Huddersfield. It is classic rags to riches tale. The youngest of three sons, his father was a carpenter and his mother worked a smallholding. He now has two children of his own and a home in Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire. He is now a member of the

Royal Society, but was no runaway success at the local grammar school, leaving at 16 to work at the pathology laboratories of Huddersfield Royal Infirmary. Practical work fired him up. After studying at night school he went on to win a first class degree in microbiology at London University before obtaining a doctorate in microbial biochemistry at Bristol.

His enthusiasm for matching scientific research with business came after his nine years at the Squibb Institute for Medical Research in the US. "I loved America, it's my kind of place. Lots of energy, drive and enthusiasm," he once said.

As deputy chairman and chief executive of Glaxo, Sir Richard proved he could mix the gravitas of a scientist with the acumen of a businessman. Glaxo needed it. The City was worried that management was becoming complacent after discovering sudden success with Zantac, the anti-ulcer pill that became the world's best selling drug.

Zantac had provided 43 per cent of Glaxo's turnover and put a second division company into the giants' league. But the US patent ran out in 1997 and few in the Glaxo hierarchy seemed aware of the pending problems.

Sir Richard grasped the nettle immediately. His comeback strategy was to launch an undervalued Argos bid for an undervalued Wellcome and set about cutting costs with a zeal that astonished some of his former associates.

Secondly, he pushed the Glaxo Wellcome research arm hard for new products and by the first half of 1997 had seen sales of those drugs launched since 1990 rise by 50 per cent.

Despite an expected 1997 profits slowdown, the Glaxo share price rose as analysts remain convinced that Sir Richard's continuing optimism about the future is well founded. The proposed SmithKline deal has sent stocks racing

well. Mr Leschy is a former Davis Cup tennis player but the Glaxo boss is also a keep-fit fan who is pretty nifty with a racquet. James Culverwell, pharmaceutical analyst with Merrill Lynch, confirms that Sir Richard will greatly add to his reputation if the latest deal goes through: "The timing of both Wellcome and SmithKline mergers has been excellent."

Robin Gilbert of PaineWebber Gordon has little but praise for the Glaxo boss: "Scientists turned top industrialists are pretty rare. Sir Richard has been an outstanding success. He is a balanced individual who knows his own mind."

Not everyone sings his praises. One City figure said: "He is well regarded but he can be abrasive, impatient and opinionated."

The departure last year of Sean Lance, originally brought in as chairman-designate, was seen by some as an example that Sir Richard, like his predecessor Sir Paul Girolami, might not be the easiest person to work with.

Critics also point to the ulcer drug, Tritec, and the anaesthesia relief, Ultiva, as examples of the Glaxo chairman trumpeting products that failed to fly commercially. Such comments are unlikely to worry Sir Richard. He once said: "I cannot run a company on the basis of what people think about me. I have to run it on the basis of what I believe is right for it in the long-term."

– Terry Macalister

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4 February 1998

Takeover stampede pushes Footsie to fifth consecutive peak

MARKET REPORT



DEREK PAIN

Blue chips maintained their record breaking run, hitting a high for the fifth consecutive session. The Footsie gain, however, was the smallest in the current winning streak, 13.8 points to 5,612.8.

Corporate action was again the main spur, with the £4bn Pacific Corp bid for Energy and Great Universal Stores' £1.6bn strike at struggling Argos creating excitement. The £382m Australian offer for Henderson, the fund manager, was another positive influence.

The outstanding feature in the latest takeover stampede is that cash, rather than high-flying equity, is king. Overseas companies, which have played a big role in the bid space, invariably offer cash and Pacific Corp and Australia's AMP are merely following the accepted pattern. But GUS and the much smaller Enterprise Inns, buying Gibbs Mew, opted for cash.

Energy and Argos went above their respective bid prices as the stock market sensed more action. Energy gained 21p to 775.5p against a 760p offer, and Argos went to 630p, up 188p, compared with the 570p GUS shot. GUS rose 29p to 762p and Kingfisher, seen as a possible counter-bidder, put on 2.5p to 961p, recovering 10.5p fall. Henderson fell 42.5p to 1,622.5p.

For once blue chips did not hog the limelight, with the Midcap and Smallcap indices making headway. The last time Footsie was in such rampant form was in May last year when Labour swept to power.

Engineers, depressed by Asia and sterling's strength, staged a comeback. Siebe led the way with a 67p advance to 1,147p. TI Group, 25p to 462p, and LucasVarity, 5.5p to 214p, joined in.

Builders too experienced a strong, if not through-the-roof,

session on the back of the encouraging Bryant figures. The sector climbed 3.3 per cent with Bryant up 9p to 122p and George Wimpey 9p to 102.5p.

The latest lottery scandal produced a mixed response from the Camelot owners.

Cadbury Schweppes, partly

on US considerations, hardened 23p to 759p; Racal Electronic lost 5p to 260p and De La Rue eased 6p to 361.5p.

Whitbread was flat, off

2.5p to 965p, as a 3.5 million

parcel sought a home. Diageo added 16.5p to 568.5p on the calmer Asian outlook and positive comment from Morgan Stanley. Gibbs frotched 30.5p higher to 339p on the Enterprise bid. The pub chain clinched control by lifting its stake to 58.3 per cent, buying 25.7 per cent at 349p.

Bearsls Hunter, an electrical group, rose 12p to 70.5p as it joined the takeover bandwagon by declaring it had received

"a number of approaches" but was not seeking talks.

William Morrison, never far from bid speculation, hardened 4p to 261p as a family shareholder sold 2 million shares at 260p, retaining 5.1 per cent.

Speculative activity continued to swirl through financials with Abbey National hitting a 1,312p peak with a 62p gain. Ripples of the GUS

strike spread through retailers with MFI 10p stronger at 131p. Elsewhere Enterprise Oil jumped 21p to 590.5p on bid gossip.

Glaxo Wellcome, the star of the merger mania, predictably fell back on profit-taking, down 56p to 1,927p. Smith-Kline Beecham softened 14.5p to 830.5p and Zeneca lost 88p to 2,597p.

Tate & Lyle, where bid talk had helped lift the shares to a 563p peak, fell 41p to 507p on a profits warning.

KS Biomedix was the latest

biotech to enjoy a run, up 67p to 225.5p following positive results from the phase two trial on its rheumatoid arthritis treatment.

Range Cooker, which slipped quietly on to the market at 6.25p in December, held at 9p after reporting interim profits flared from £291,500 to £1.05m.

Pex, the sock maker, is

likely to produce disappointing figures in April. Although interim profits were higher, sales in October and November have pulled back the year's performance.

Pace Micro Technology, involved in a £5m cost cutting exercise, at last won orders from BskyB for digital set-top boxes; the shares gained 10p to 40p, they have been 241.5p.

Amstrad, another beneficiary of BskyB set-top orders, improved 3.5p to 32.5p. The satellite broadcaster, on

slightly better than expected

results, gained 19p to 361p.

United Overseas, selling sur-

plus stock, improved 3p to 95p, a peak. Year's profits of £9.1m against £7.3m are expected.

Innovative Technologies put

on 14.5p to 116p on a deal to supply the German Beiersdorf

group with wound dressings.

James Noble, former finance

director of British Biotech, is

likely to become chairman.

TAKING STOCK

Watch Quality Software Products, Stockbroker Sutherland has lifted its profits forecast to £2m and put a 400p target on the shares, off 2.5p to 345p. There is also a market suspicion that bid action is near. The shares touched 708p two years ago.

Corporate activity could develop at Future Integrated Telephony, unchanged at 65p. Amit Hemani, creator of the Westcoast computer group, has 3.2 per cent. Now a nominee company has

acquired 4.27 per cent. It is said to be acting for parties

which do not want Mr Hemani to become too

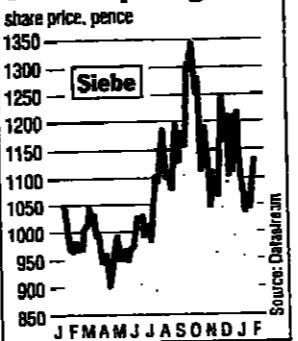
powerful at FIT.

Simon held at 50p. Its reorganisation is complete and

the former engineering group, which has had a difficult time, is now concentrating on port and engineering services.

Profits of around £12.5m are likely for last year.

Share spotlight



Source: Bloomberg

Share price, pence

1350
1300
1250
1200
1150
1100
1050
1000
950
900
850

J F M A M J J A S O N D J F

Share Price Data

Prices are in sterling except where stated. The yield is the latest twelve months' declared gross dividend as a percentage of the share price. The price/earning (P/E) ratio is the share price divided by last year's earnings per share, excluding extraordinary items but including dividends. Other details: Ex date; E = Ex-dividend; S = Suspended; P = Parity; Pmt = Pmt date; A = Amt. Gk = Gk. Prices are Bloomberg Generic.

Source: Bloomberg

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0900 calls cost 10p per minute. (TUE, 10am EC2A 479)

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Seq volume: 886.5m trades 81.896

FTSE 100 index 103.02, unchanged

Market Leaders: Top 20 volumes

at 8.00pm

Stock Vol Stock Vol Stock Vol Stock Vol

Guscott still showing no signs of mortality

Jeremy Guscott dismisses the extraordinary level of interest generated by his return to England colours as "weird", but mere mortals remain astonished by his powers of recovery. As Chris Hewett reports, Guscott's appearance against France in Paris on Saturday marks the high point of his achievement.

It was Andy Robinson, the Bath coach and a long-time playing colleague of Jeremy Guscott's, who hit the nail on the head. Asked to assess the risk involved in selecting the celebrated Prince of Centres for last weekend's Heineken Cup final on the strength of one match in six and a half months, Robbo responded: "Risk? What risk? There's no risk in selecting a player of Jerry's ability."

"OK," replied a persistent inquisitor. "How many players are blessed with such ability?" Robinson narrowed his eyes, stared at his questioner as though he was completely barking and turned away to talk to someone with a handle on reality. It was an understandable reaction; no one who has played either with or against Guscott these last dozen years or so would have considered an answer necessary.

Trillions of words have been penned on the subject of Guscott's unique contribution to British threequarter play since his England debut in 1989, a fair percentage of them in the wake of his two great Test-winning strikes for the Lions - the kick-and-gather try in Brisbane on his first tour nine years ago and the last-minute drop goal that beat the Springboks in Durban last June.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that Clive Woodward's de-

FIVE NATIONS COUNTDOWN

cision to run his favourite centre at the Stade de France on Saturday on the strength of approximately three hours of rugby constitutes a new high-water mark. Guscott's last Test appearance, against South Africa in Johannesburg in July, cost him a broken arm and when he subsequently picked up some serious damage to a disc in his lower back during rehabilitative training with Bath last September, the game appeared to be up.

Many of his closest club colleagues expected him to call it quits. He was 32, surgery was required and anyway, he had done it all umpteen times over. He had played for the Lions in every major rugby stronghold in the southern hemisphere, he had appeared in a World Cup final, he had won Grand Slams and Triple Crowns by the sackload and had pocketed more domestic league and cup final medals than he knew what to do with.

Those colleagues were wrong. "I'm a rugby player and I play because I love the game," Guscott said this week. "Why would I want to retire now? We've got a World Cup to think about next year and while there is a chance of being part of the England squad, I'm focusing on Guscott's genius at first hand. Indeed, they all played against Australia in the 1991 World Cup final.

All the same, it is difficult to think of another player anywhere in the world who would be thrown into what is certain to be an extreme physical and psychological trial in such unpropitious circumstances. Guscott loves playing in Paris, but a France-England Test is no one's idea of garden party.

"Look, I've played two full games since coming back, the first of which I ended up losing, the second of which was the greatest day in my club's histo-

ry. I'm enjoying my rugby and helping Bath beat Brive has put my confidence levels on a high.

"If the atmosphere in Bordeaux was anything to go by, the French are crazy for rugby at the moment. It will be spine-tingling over there. If you add to that the fact that England are playing some pretty expansive stuff at the moment, you could say I'm looking forward to this weekend."

"But I must say I find a lot of the attention coming my way a bit on the weird side. I'm one player in an exciting squad focused on the big games coming up and nothing else has any relevance. My only goal after the operation was to recover some health and fitness and play for Bath. To be picked for England now was not something I expected, but I'm chuffed to bits to be involved again."

It now seems certain that Guscott, who wins his 49th England cap in Paris, will realise one of the few tangible ambitions left to him: membership of the exclusive Red Rose 50 Club. Only seven players have hung in there long enough to gain admission and all of them - Rory Underwood, Will Carling, Rob Andrew, Brian Moore, Peter Winterbottom, Wade Dooley and Jason Leonard - experienced Guscott's genius at first hand. Indeed, they all played against Australia in the 1991 World Cup final.

Guscott and Leonard are the only components of that side still plying their trade at the most rarified level, although Andrew and Underwood remain active in the Allied Dunbar Premiership. It will be no surprise to discover the "J's" - Jerry and Jason, both educated at state comprehensives, both renowned as players' players - in a quiet corner of some bar in the Rue de la Madeleine on Saturday night. After all, they have almost as much to look forward to as they have in common.

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A tasteful study from bacon butties to venison burgers on the Orient Excess

For some, the prospect of whether or not they should eat at a match weighs heavily on the mind, if not the stomach. *Catherine Riley* reports on a new survey into the fare on offer in and around football grounds.

Everyone has their own favourite horror story of match-day food; there's the burger that came with a fingernail, another one with a tooth already in it and the kebab containing a maggot.

As jobs go, a food taster for Egon Ronay or Michelin has a certain appeal, but sampling the food on offer around the 92 League clubs, as well as Wembley, has to be a labour of love. The testers came back with

only 15 stomach upsets and 27 burnt fingers between them, having consumed 323 pies, 291 burgers and one balti pie at Wembley.

TASTY: THE TOP TEN

- 1 Cambridge United
- 2 Huddersfield Town
- 3 Rochdale
- 4 Chesterfield
- 5 Charlton Athletic
- 6 Hartlepool United
- 7 Rotherham United
- 8 Middlesbrough
- 9 Stoke City
- 10 Preston North End

in the Premiership, but in the Third Division, Cambridge United took the honours for their all-round catering – the highlight being the bacon butties. The secret, apparently, is in using two slices of best back bacon, grilled for optimum nose-appeal.

For all its money, the Premiership is poorly represented, with just four clubs in the top 20. Manchester United heads the list in 12th, with a special commendation for the van behind the Old Trafford End which sells venison burgers.

England's plans to host the World Cup in 2006 may have

been damaged by the placing of the national stadium in 89th. Last May, Tony Banks, minister for sport, said: "The food at Wembley is absolutely disgraceful. I'm surprised more people don't die of food poisoning after eating there." Rebuilding a stadium which charges over £6 for a "tasteless" burger, chips and Coca-Cola is the only option.

Life is not much better for Welsh supporters. Cardiff City, Wrexham and Swansea City are all in the bottom 10. The Vetch Field was noted for its sausage roll, in which the sole purpose of the skin of the sausage was to

YUK: THE WORST TEN

- 1 Leyton Orient
- 2 Swansea City
- 3 Bristol City
- 4 Wrexham
- 5 Wembley
- 6 Oxford United
- 7 Chester City
- 8 Tottenham Hotspur
- 9 Peterborough United
- 10 Cardiff City

prevent the contents from flowing free".

Vegetarians are less well served, crisps being the safest bet – assuming you have ever heard of the manufacturer and they are still within their sell-by date.

Whereas the pies and burgers were generally found to be lukewarm, hot drinks come on the warmer side of scalding. Most are helpfully served in plastic cups that melt in the hand around three seconds after leaving the counter, forcing the purchaser to suffer third-degree burns or drop the contents over their legs. At some grounds, this is the warmest your feet will ever get. On the cold – or tepid – front, Arsenal have stockpiled the type of orange drink which was only ever found in cinemas 20 years ago.

In the taste test, hot chocolate is the best approximation you are likely to find, assuming you can stir the inch of sludge at the bottom of the cup into life. Ditto the beef-flavour drink. Let us hope we never become a nation of litigants – McDonald's "scalding coffee" case may set the benchmark for a million damages claims.

Sadly, "Who ate all the pies" is something that may never be heard at Brisbane Road. Leyton Orient get the dubious honour of coming bottom of the food league. The editor of their fanzine *All Aboard the Wagon Train* sums it up as "We had better meat from live cows with BSE." Take sandwiches.

FOOTBALL

Scholes out of Cup tie after second suspension

Paul Scholes has been given his second suspension of the season, allowing his eighth booking against Leicester on Saturday. He will miss Manchester United's FA Cup fifth-round tie against either Tottenham or Barnsley on 15 February and the tie with the FA Cup semi-final at Wembley three days later.

One player United missed out on, Marcelo Salas, has signed a pre-contract agreement for £12m with Lazio. The Italian club announced yesterday that they intend to give the 23-year-old Chilean international an eight-year contract – if they can bypass Italian league rules of a maximum five-year deal.

Salas, who scored 11 goals in Chile's successful World Cup qualifying campaign, is expected to play for his country in their friendly against England at Wembley next week.

The former Italy and Milan coach Arrigo Sacchi has turned down an offer to coach the Spanish champions Real Madrid next season. Madrid asked Sacchi to take over from Jupp

Heynckes, who inherited the job from the current Milan coach, Fabio Capello. But Sacchi rejected the offer, in part because he wants to work either in France or England, but also because he did not want to take over a squad built by Capello.

Crystal Palace's bid to sign the young Carlisle striker Matt Jansen took on greater urgency yesterday when Neil Shipperley was ruled out for eight weeks following a hernia operation. The former Chelsea striker had been in form at the end of last year, scoring six goals in eight games until he was sidelined by a groin problem.

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Jockey Club climbs down over suspensions

The three jockeys questioned, but not charged, by police last week and then suspended by the Jockey Club will be allowed to ride from tomorrow following a volte-face by racing's disciplinary body. **Richard Edmondson reports.**

When banning Jamie Osborne, Dean Gallagher and Leighton Aspell last week, racing's investigative force announced a meeting for today "when the jockeys will have an opportunity

to make any further representations as to why that suspension should not be continued for a longer period". In the event, there will be no explanation required and the trio will simply have their licences returned at Portman Square.

The Jockey Club's reason for its reversal of attitude is simple: they asked people. Or in mandarin-speak they took "soundings within the industry". There will, however, be no official apology. The Jockey Club maintains it acted correctly to maintain public confidence.

The only panic, though, was at the Jockey Club itself. Punters still turned out this week

(figures from bookmakers and the Tote actually show an increase in turnover). The weighing room was no Bastille for frustrated backers.

Christopher Foster, the Jockey Club's executive director, said yesterday: "The Licensing Committee still requires the jockeys to attend [today's meeting] because it wishes there to be no room for doubt at to why the Committee suspended the licences in the first place." This is just as well as the space remains as large as ever.

"Not only has it been a difficult week for the jockeys, but also highly confusing," Michael Caulfield, the secretary to the

Jockeys' Association, said yesterday. "The behaviour of the Jockey Club has been curious to say the least and we look forward to our meeting with them tomorrow. It will be a unique feeling to go to the Jockey Club already knowing the result.

"If it had not been for the representations made by the jockeys' solicitors, the three riders may, I believe, have been suspended until 29 April or beyond. I am terribly aware of the seriousness of the past week's events, but the Jockey Club did not apply natural justice and this had to be challenged."

Andrew Chalk, Osborne's solicitor, said: "I would like to

make it clear that the decision to hold a further meeting tomorrow resulted from vigorous representations made by the jockeys' solicitors. At the outset, the Committee gave no indication they were considering suspensions on a short-term basis.

"The Committee did not inform us that they would be taking soundings of the industry to assess the risk to public confidence in horseracing and it is surprising that this was not made clear to us."

"We were told that we could return on 4 February so that we could make further representations as to why the suspensions 'should not be continued for a

longer period'. That appeared to put the onus on us to show good reasons why the licences should be reinstated."

It is the residual effect of the last week that most bothers the jockeys and their supporters.

"The loss of character is more of a problem than loss of earnings," Graeme James, Aspell's agent, said. "To the public it's something that won't go away in a hurry and he'll be remembered for some time as being one of the 'weighing-room three'."

The conditional (apprentice) jockey's main trainer, Josh Gifford, added: "I would like an explanation from the Jockey Club. Leighton is a conditional jock-

ey and I'm meant to be responsible for him. It's an absolute joke. They've got themselves in a bloody great hole and now they can't get out of it."

Aspell is likely to be the first of the three back in action. "This week has been very stressful for me and my family," he said. "I am very relieved to have my licence returned and am looking forward to getting back on to the racecourse where I can concentrate on winning races."

That opportunity may come tomorrow on Gifford's New Rising at Towcester. It will be a significant moment in a case which has hardly highlighted the Jockey Club's capabilities.

Drama goes on as Yates awaits verdict

Kevin Yates, the Bath prop accused of biting Simon Fenn's ear, yesterday faced a Rugby Football Union disciplinary panel at Twickenham. **Chris Hewett reports.**

The sorry story of Simon Fenn's ear was turning into a saga of Homeric proportions yesterday as Kevin Yates turned up at Twickenham to answer allegations of ear-biting. When the highly rated 26-year-old prop was summoned to face the music he could hardly have expected it to drag on like a Wagner opera, but as darkness fell over south-west London last night there was still no sign of an end to his ordeal.

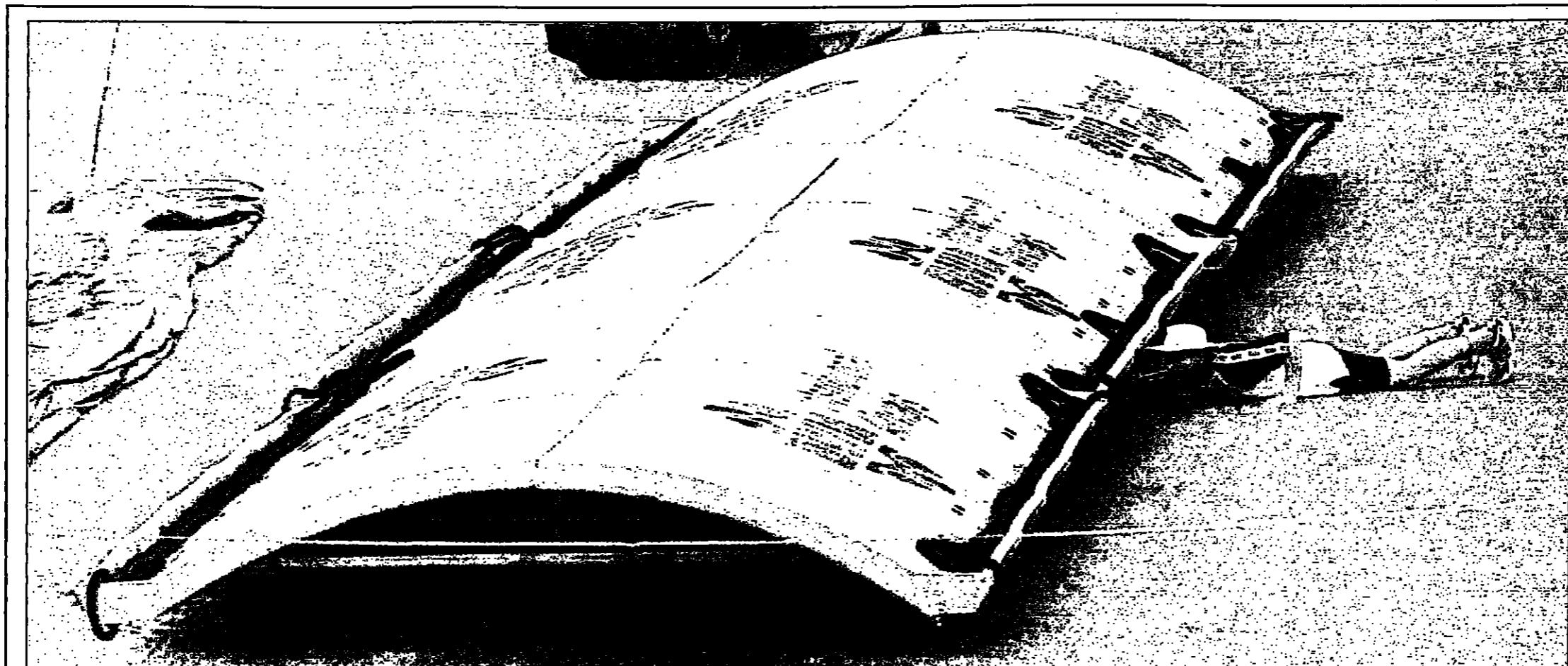
The proceedings, chaired by Michael Burton QC in the company of two Rugby Football Union management board members, Jonathan Dance and Brian Baister, began at 9.30 in the morning. Yates and Fenn, the London Scottish flanker he was accused of assaulting, were there from the off, as were the rest of the Bath pack who played in the fateful Ted's Bitter Cup match at the Rec on 10 January.

After nine hours of considering medical evidence, hearing witness statements and conducting cross-examinations, the panel were a "long way short of a verdict", in the words of Richard Prescott, the RFU director of communications. "The hearing went straight through lunch," he added, to eliminate any suspicion that the union was conducting this piece of business over the traditional three courses and lashings of gin and tonic.

One Bath player, Federico Mendez, flew in from Spain to be there. The Argentinian hooker was one of three players, including Yates and his fellow prop, Victor Ubogu, originally cited by the Exiles. Like other witnesses he filed a written account of events as well as making a personal appearance.

After intense pressure from London Scottish, who paraded Fenn before the press and television cameras 48 hours after the match, Bath suspended Yates on full pay on 13 January. He missed the Heineken Cup final with Brive and a number of England squad sessions, from which he withdrew on diplomatic grounds. He would almost certainly have been named in England's party for this weekend's Five Nations match against the French in Paris.

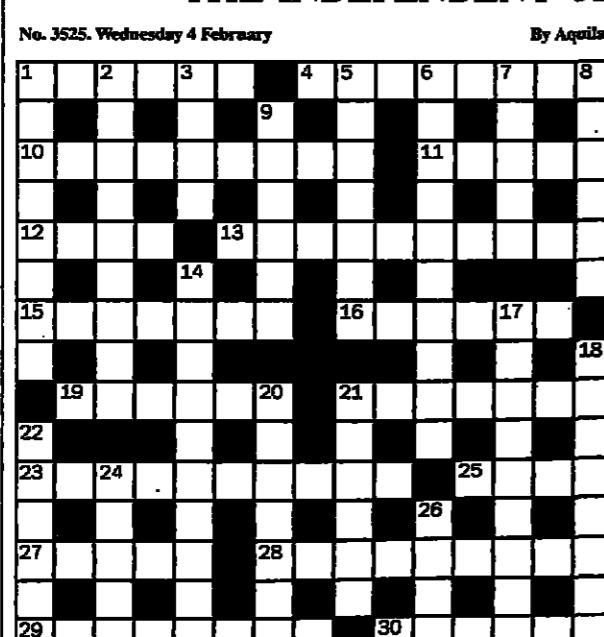
The likely outcome last night was an adjournment, either to today or next week. If Yates, who has always protested his innocence, was less than amused by the protracted agony of uncertainty, the tribunal members were acutely aware of the legal consequences of getting it wrong. Who said rugby was only a game?



Undercover investigation: Michael Atherton tries to get the low-down on the pitch yesterday for the first of the back-to-back Tests in Port of Spain, Trinidad

Photograph: David Ashdown

THE INDEPENDENT CROSSWORD

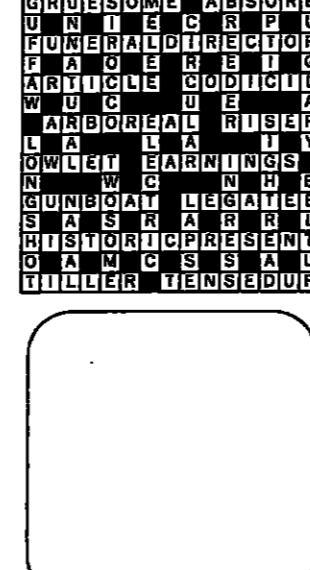


ACROSS
1 Ena, a mad sort of woman (6)
4 Do its sufferers call house-doctors? (8)
10 Epistoler in Minnesota (5,4)
11 What is the value of a poet lost for words? (5)
12 Bird among the faster, head-burying sort (4)
13 Rise and set off for drive (3-2-3-2)
15 Broken promise of a paid part-timer (7)
16 Takes aim in spectacles (6)
19 Spies following a Manx cat in tropical shrub (6)
21 Excitable bloke is getting the needle? (7)
23 Loose tie on a principal teacher in college (10)

25 Monkshood, say, that has a function on a chimney (4)
27 Excited cry of woman receiving ring (5)
28 Weapon giving most trouble in dismountment programme? (9)
29 Gaunt and tall? Seek treatment! (8)
30 Compensation whilst not actually fitting? (6)
DOWN
1 Suspicion of corrosion after condensation (8)
2 Rash around head of radish is affecting outer skin (9)
3 Wine taken in feasting (4)
5 Hitches in traffic jams (7)
6 Pawn Legend, all singing all dancing production (10)
7 Drawn by siren leeward, say the sailors (5)

By Aquila

Tuesday's Solution



FOOTBALL

Italians renew commitment to Chelsea

Gianfranco Zola and Roberto Di Matteo have both signed two-year extensions to their contracts at Chelsea.

Zola has committed himself to the club until 2002, taking him to the age of 35, while Di Matteo also signed a similar contract extension taking him to the age of 31, the club revealed yesterday. Their promising 20-year-old midfielder Mark Nicholls has also extended his contract.

Chelsea have also been linked with the Rangers striker Brian Laudrup, whose contract runs out this summer. His agent was reported to have held talks at Stamford Bridge last weekend, and the Dane is expected to choose between Chelsea and Ajax.

Portsmouth will discover in 10 days' time what action they

will face from the Football Association after the assistant referee, Edward Martin, was attacked by a Sheffield United supporter during the 1-1 draw on Saturday.

The FA launched an inquiry following the incident at Fratton Park, when Martin was knocked unconscious. David Davies, the FA spokesman, confirmed yesterday they will wait for the report of the referee, Mark Halsey, before deciding what action to take.

Meanwhile, Pompey have abandoned their attempt to sign the Australian international goalkeeper Zeljko Kalac following a sixth-month legal wrangle over the Department of Employment's refusal to issue a work permit.

Sheffield Wednesday are also at the mercy of the DoE -

their hopes of signing the Polish defender Pawel Wojtala on loan from Hamburg hinge on the success of their application for a work permit.

Wednesday have agreed to pay Hamburg an initial fee of £60,000 plus an additional £20,000 for each appearance the 25-year-old makes during a loan period that extends until the end of the season.

The Premiership club have also agreed a fee of £800,000, should they decide to sign him permanently in the summer.

Manchester City could have a third Georgian in their side on Saturday after finally receiving a work permit for Kakhaber Tskhadadze, after beating Liverpool to sign the Alania Vladikavkaz defender.

George Graham, the Leeds manager, has denied rumours

linking him with a £3m move for Portugal's leading scorer Nuno Gomes, and a possible swap deal involving Rod Wallace.

"I was at Benfica on Sunday, but I was actually watching a player from Setubal," Graham said. "So there's no truth in the story linking myself with Gomes. I have not made a bid for him and I have also not received an offer for Wallace from Benfica."

Newcastle have signed Aberdeen's Scotland Under-21 midfielder Stephen Glass on a pre-contract agreement. Glass travelled to Tyneside for talks yesterday to tie up a deal, after playing in Monday's 3-1 defeat at Celtic. Aberdeen rate the 21-year-old at £1.5m, although the Magpies would prefer to pay around £500,000.

BSkyB writ, page 21

Gascoigne awaits SFA verdict over Old Firm flute antics

Paul Gascoigne will discover today if he is to face disciplinary action by the Scottish Football Association over his controversial flute-playing gesture at the New Year Old Firm game.

The England midfielder has already been fined £20,000 by Rangers and has issued a formal public apology after initiating a flute-player while warming up for the match on 2 January at Parkhead.

Regarded as an inflammatory gesture, the incident brought protests from the Celtic board, as well as their fans and it will be discussed by the SFA's executive committee today.

Gascoigne will not be appearing in person but will receive written notification of any punishment.

David Findlay, the SFA spokesman, said: "There have been a variety of letters received following an incident at the Old Firm match.

"The committee will discuss the matter relative to the player's actions and if they determine it is necessary to take the matter further they would wish

to inform the parties concerned first before making any public statement."

Gascoigne is currently battling to regain full fitness in time for Rangers' game with Dunfermline at Ibrox on Saturday, after appearing as a substitute in their weekend defeat by St Johnstone.

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